WHITEHURST, APRIL CORN, Ph.D. The Writing Lives of Students with Learning Disabilities: A Multiple Case Study. (2019)
Directed by Dr. Claudia Pagliaro. 254 pp.

Adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) often struggle to write well at school, and this can affect their academic, social, and vocational lives (Graham & Harris, 2013). Recently, an abundance of technologies have emerged, changing the process of writing from the manipulation of alphabetic text to include sound, audio, video, and still images (Kinzer, 2010). As the meaning of what constitutes writing has evolved to include skills needed to use these new tools and technologies, the act of writing has become more prevalent in every aspect of life (Brandt, 2001). Adolescents with LD, however, are often taught to write using direct methods that do not encompass the evolution of writing nor take into account student status as adolescents. Consequently, research generally has not considered how these students adapt to and learn the new skills needed to be considered literate. This study used a multiple case study methodology to explore the writing perceptions and experiences of three students with LD. Data collected included artifacts, interview transcripts and observations. Findings showed that students expressed meaningful ideas through writing in their classroom environment with limited success. They wrote more when writing about themselves, when given a choice of topic, and when using digital technology. Peer interactions, the need for autonomy while writing, and time to write were important. Students both consumed and produced writing using social media and exhibited skills learned through social media at school. Implications for teachers and researchers are included.

THE WRITING LIVES OF STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:

A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2019

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Mr. Martin, Mrs. Rigby, Roy, Bobby, Ski, Billy and Ringo, as well as all the students and teachers I have been privileged to learn with through the years. Learning and teaching is hard, brave work and I treasure your willingness to let me learn from your experience.

Thank you to my committee for allowing me to make my doctoral journey my own without having to walk it alone. To Dr. Claudia Pagliaro for professional, clear and wise advice while always focusing on the goal. Thanks also for incredible detailed and patient editing which has helped me to become a better writer and thinker. To Dr. Pamela Williamson for guiding through my first research as a doctoral student and keeping the focus on our field. To Dr. Christie Cavanaugh for reintroducing me to the joys of teaching and being a constant cheerleader and encourager. To Dr. Amy Vetter for teaching intriguing classes that helped me find and redefine my calling. Thanks for being willing to work outside your department and for believing in my project and constantly reminding me to believe in it. Thanks for hours and hours of writing and research support and advice and for everything you have done to help me make this project come to fruition.

Also, thanks to Dr. Lisa Bloom at Western Carolina University who first pointed me toward the doctoral path while discussing research over a cup of tea in Cullowhee. Thanks for teaching an inspiring online research methods class and for guiding me through my first conference presentation. You helped me realize how much I enjoy

research, while helping me realize that I can make a difference for students with disabilities.

Thanks and appreciation to the current and former doctoral students in the Department of Specialized Educational Services at UNCG, especially the members of the *PhD 2019* group. Being surrounded by intelligent, creative, hardworking, and passionate people has been exhilarating. When we collaborate and support each other our efforts to benefit students with disabilities are multiplied. I look forward to working with many of you in the future.

Thanks especially to Taylor and Khulod for your part in making this project.

I grew up in a home that valued learning and was full of words, music, stories, projects, and laughter. Thanks mom and dad for the stories about Grizzly Bear winters so cold that the fire froze, for trip after trip to the library coming home with arms full of books, for all the poems and music. Thanks to my siblings Greg, Erica, and Wesley who have each traveled their unique paths to get where they are, reinforcing my beliefs that everyone has stories to tell that need to be heard and valued.

Finally, thanks to Sam, Quay and Chase - my live-in research subjects - for being totally who you are and refusing to give in to any expectation, definition, label or stereotype. You have taught me more than I will ever learn from a book, a study or a class. Quay and Chase, your constant analysis and feedback prepared me well for my doctoral studies. Sam, your unyielding support has brought me through to the end.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Recently, as a class assignment, I interviewed three adolescents with learning disabilities (LD), ranging in age from middle school to college, about their literacy experiences both in and out of school. All three students said that they did not like to write, and all reported making low grades in writing assignments at school. What's more, their struggle with writing seemed to put a damper on all of their in-class activities. One of the students identified science as a personal strength but said that he did not do well in his biology class because of the amount and specificity of the writing required. Another student reported being embarrassed by his spelling and handwriting skills and felt like "he looked like an idiot" when people saw his writing. All three students complained about writing assignments that required them to summarize their reading. Additionally, they added that the books they were asked to read at school were boring and not the type of writing they wanted to do.

Oddly, as I steered the conversation toward activities that the students did at home, it became clear to me that these students had strong literacy skills and that they used those skills often. One student talked about his conversations on Reddit, a conglomerate of online discussion groups. He regularly checked certain pages and discussed different points of view about TV shows and politics. He talked about how one had to use different types of language to express different views and how each Reddit

page had different norms that users had to follow, or they would be "kicked off" the page. Another student told me he was a videographer and videotaped numerous school activities. He was skilled at not only using the digital cameras and Internet technology through which he shared the work, but also chose and edited videos in order to convey messages that represented the school or activity in different ways.

From these conversations, I could tell that these three teens were skillfully using literacies in multiple ways and contexts; however, their school experiences did not seem to reflect their abilities or result in remediating their writing skills. All three seemed to find themselves positioned at school within the popular notion of adolescence. They appeared to go through school attempting, but not always completing, assignments they were given, reading books that had little meaning to them, and not always understanding the reasons for the schoolwork they were assigned. Outside of school, however, they were behaving in adult way—adapting to a variety of audiences, providing valuable services, and having literate conversations with a variety of people about serious and meaningful topics.

In spite of their clear strengths, I worried about how these students would navigate their future educational experiences and vocations. Would their school experiences eventually help them acquire the skills they needed to be successful in classroom activities? Would they be able to enter vocations that maximized their potential, or would lack of school-valued literacy skills keep them from reaching their goals?

While it is known that students with LD often grow up to be adults that struggle to write, little is known about how the way that we teach them to write affects their writing lives. Because the true reality must be experienced to really understand it, the best resources for learning about students with LD are the students themselves.

The present study tells the stories of three students with LD. Through their own words and through my observations, I share the experiences and perceptions of their writing lives over one semester of a school year.

Statement of the Problem

Adolescents with LD often struggle to write well at school, and this struggle can have serious effects on their academic, social, and future vocational lives (Graham & Harris, 2013b). Test scores and research about the writing of students with LD reinforces these ideas (Graham & Hall, 2016). Indeed, these students write less than students without LD, their writing is not as clear or complete, and it is not as often grammatically correct. Unfortunately, these problems persist into adulthood (Berninger, Nielsen, Abbott, Wijsman, & Raskind, 2008).

Writing has become more important and more prevalent in every aspect of life (Brandt, 2001). Many workers spend most of their time typing keyboards, social lives are dependent on texting and social media applications, and academic success in almost every area is tied to writing skills. Therefore, when students struggle to write, they are likely to be negatively affected in every aspect of their lives.

Special Education Research

Research in special education in recent years has recognized the importance of writing, and efforts have been made to increase the amount of research that is done in this area (Graham & Hall, 2016). The bulk of this research has focused on ways to teach students to write that use direct and explicit methods to learn specific writing skills (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doable, 2009). Although these investigations have resulted in some knowledge about how to teach students specific skills, most often associated with traditional literacies, little is known about how these types of interventions affect students over time and with various types of writing.

Within the special education literature, it is difficult to find studies that include the perceptions of student with LD or that investigate their writing experiences beyond the confines of certain interventions. Almost all the studies in the field consist of experimental or quasi-experimental designs that isolate the skills being taught from the context of students' lives. As a matter of fact, meta-analyses such as Graham and Perin's 2007 study of writing interventions for adolescents and Gillespie and Graham's 2014 meta-analysis of writing intervention for students with LD only included experimental, quasi-experimental or with-in subject studies. While these types of studies can show that a particular intervention has promise outside of its contexts, they usually do not consider the students' perspectives. Neither do they give teachers and researchers an idea of how student writing would be affected in other settings or across curricular lines.

In addition, the research literature in special education is inherently focused on what students cannot do. This is reasonable as teachers are tasked with making sure that

students meet Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and show growth on standardized testing. However, this focus does not recognize the literary strengths that students may possess but that are not valued in school. An understanding of new literacy studies and 21st century literacy skills highlights the importance of expanding our understanding of what literacy skills are important.

New Literacies and 21st Century Skills

As the stories in the introduction illustrate, literacies that students use at home are often different than literacies that are taught in school. New literacy perspectives are an emerging set of theories about changes in literacy due to the proliferation of the Internet and other digital technologies that greatly redefine the skills needed to be literate (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). New literacies not only include the need to learn new skills, but also the ability to constantly adjust to new technology that requires different and more sophisticated abilities. Engaging with this type of literature requires new information to be intercepted, analyzed, evaluated, and re-distributed quickly and in ways that meet the needs of the audience for whom it is meant. Twenty-first century skills are a part of new literacy theory, which focuses on specific skills that students will need to be successfully literate in the 21st century (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2013). The NCTE standards and the Common Core State Standards include the necessity for teachers to integrate 21st century skills into traditional literacy instruction (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015). Being able to fluently use new digital technologies, to critically analyze, select and synthesize large amounts of information, and to communicate and collaborate with others to create multi-modal productions that

communicate globally across cultures and societies are examples of new literacy skills that all students need to learn (NCTE, 2013).

We need to know more about how students with LD fair when attempting to learn the many skills necessary for 21st century literacies (Peterson-Karlan, 2011). There is also a need for educators and researchers alike to understand the unique struggles that adolescents with LD may have due to their status as both adolescents and people with LD.

Youth Cultural Studies

Youth cultural studies consider the way teens are positioned in society (Moje, 2002). Adolescence is often characterized as a time of chaos, rebellion, and divergent behavior. Popular jokes indicate that youth are lazy, irresponsible, and irrational, a notion perpetuated through TV shows, cartoons, and even youth literature.

Yet, youth cultural studies theorists maintain that these popular depictions of teenagers do not accurately reflect this group of people. In fact, they maintain that adolescence itself is a constructed term that has resulted in students not being taken seriously for who they are, for their abilities or for their contributions to society (Lesko, 2012). In this time of adolescence, teens are kept in the state of childhood longer than needed, and their value is generally considered for who they will become, not for who they are. This prolonging of childhood is perhaps even more prevalent for adolescents with LD. These students are often thought of and discussed in terms of their cognitive deficits or their struggles at school.

Learning Disability

The concept of LD has long been a subject of controversy. One of the 13 categories for eligibility for special education in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it covers about 34% of the students in special education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017; Yell, 2012). Students who struggle to read, to write, or to do mathematics are often given this label after going through a process mandated by IDEA and specifically designed by their state. Once determined eligible for special education, an IEP is designed and goals are made for each area in which the student struggles. Often, per their IEP, students with LD receive accommodations (e.g. extra time to complete assignments) or modifications (e.g. shorter content requirements) on assignments, spend time in a resource classroom to receive remediation, and take tests in separate locations. IDEA mandates that students be educated in the least restrictive environment; so, by the time they reach middle school, students are often educated in their general education classroom and receive supports within that classroom (NCES, 2017; Yell, 2012).

In addition to challenges in academics, research has shown that students labeled LD often suffer from social and emotional problems. Lower self-concept, trouble making and keeping friends, and higher levels of depression and suicide attempts have been documented for students with LD as compared to their typical peers (Majorano, Brondino, Morelli, & Maes, 2017). Yet, there is not enough consistent research in this area to determine if these effects are caused by neurological and cognitive differences, by the result of lower academic success, by the label LD itself, or by some combination of

these factors. It is important, then, to understand that students with LD often struggle in areas additional to their academics and that these factors have the potential to affect performance at school.

Considering the affordances of writing, youth cultural studies and the various effects of having LD, the need to understand more about the writing experiences of students with LD is evident. A better understanding of how these students learn and adapt to the increasing number of skills that are required to be considered literate is needed.

Although there is research that indicates digital technology is a panacea for students with LD—helping them to improve traditional writing skills—it is also known that quickly changing technologies create multi-streams of information that can quickly overwhelm cognitive functioning (Peterson-Karlan, 2011). In order to better understand how we can structure learning environments and teaching techniques, there is a need to know more about how students with LD experience learning in their specific environments. We need to know how they perceive these experiences and how the experiences create these perceptions. Do students with LD thrive in inclusive environments when digital technology is used to create multimodal writing pieces? What are their writing experiences in school and at home? Do school experiences match home styles of writing, or is there a mismatch that results in little learning and negative perceptions?

Purpose of the Study

The present study uses a case study methodology to gain a more complete understanding of the writing perceptions and experiences of three students with LD within the context of their inclusion classroom. Data collected includes artifacts, interviews, and observations. The final product is a thorough description of each student's background, in and out of school writing activities, his or her perceptions of the writing process, his or her writing abilities, and writing experiences. How each student feels about writing and carries out writing in different settings including the classroom and home are also thoroughly described. This information may assist researchers and teachers to understand adolescents with LD as writers in a different way than current research allows because this research engages a new perspective: that of LD adolescents themselves. By understanding both the abilities of the students, as well as their struggles, and by hearing the frustrations and celebrations of how these students feel about their instruction, researchers and teachers may begin to consider alternate and new ways in which they can support students with LD while learning to write in an inclusive middle-school classroom.

Definition of Terms

- **Learning disability (LD):** An education term used to describe a condition that exists when a person with average or above intelligence has unexpected (i.e., no other explanations) difficulty in using a spoken or written language or in mathematics to the degree that school performance is significantly affected (Pullen, Lane, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2013).

- **Specific learning disability:** A legal term used to describe an LD, defined by a disorder of one of the basic psychological processes involved in using or understanding written or spoken language that affects the ability of a person to "listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations" (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8 (c) (10)).
- **Literacy:** An ever changing technology that involves reading and writing a language that is comprised of cultural and communicative practices shared among people in a culture or community (Gee & Hayes, 2011; NCTE, 2013).
- **Writing:** A delivery system for oral language, transforming language from an ethereal state to a permanent state (Gee & Hayes, 2011).
- **New literacies:** A theory that is emerging due to the quick proliferation of the Internet and other technologies that greatly changes the perception of literacy and skills needed to be considered literate (Yell, 2012)
- **21st century literacy skills:** The wide range of abilities and competencies that a person must have in order to be successfully literate in the 21st century, includes the use of digital technology, multimodal formats, the ability to work globally to create, share, critically analyze and evaluate information (NCTE, 2013).
- **Inclusion classroom:** A classroom in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher work together to provide instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with and without special needs (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010).

Overview of the Dissertation

The purpose of this case study is to better understand the way middle school students with LD experience and perceive writing in the context of their language arts inclusion classroom and at home and to highlight the voices of students with LD.

Chapter 2 summarizes the framework of the study by describing theories and research concerning literacy and adolescents with LD. This includes the idea of literacy as a constantly evolving technology and the current challenges this poses in a time of accelerating change. Youth cultural studies and how these studies impact our understanding of youth with LD are also included.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative multiple case study design that governs the conduct of the study and the reasons that this design is appropriate to answer the research questions. It describes in detail the data collection and analysis and the steps taken to assure the trustworthiness of the study. The limitations and strengths of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 4 describes the setting for the study, including the community, school, and classroom. Additionally, it provides a detailed summary of each student participant, compiling information gathered from each data source.

Chapter 5 includes the findings of the cross-case analysis, providing findings or themes that are present across all students. These findings are applied to each research question.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses what can be learned from the study in terms of the theoretical framework. Implications for practice and research are described.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RELEVANT RESEARCH

In this chapter, I summarize the theories and research that indicate the need for the study. First, I describe literacy as an evolving technology, as well as the theory of new literacies and the importance of 21st century skills in regard to writing. Next, I discuss adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) by synthesizing what is known about this group of people through the perspective of youth cultural studies and LD research. Third, I summarize the current state of writing instruction for adolescents with and without LD and the research that has been done in this area. Lastly, I show how these three aspects form the framework of my study.

Literacy: An Evolving Technology

Literacy involves reading and writing a language. It is a technology: A human invention that many scholars believe is the "most powerful enhancement of language in human history" (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 11). Writing, in its traditional understanding, is a delivery system for oral language, transforming language from an ethereal state to a permanent state (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Most often tied to the production of text, writing has also been described as thinking on paper or as a way to share ideas by producing text (Costa, Edwards, & Hooper, 2016).

Facilitated by economic, political, and religious forces, writing ability has often been aligned with having power or authority. One of the earliest forms of writing, the use

of cuneiform tablets to record agricultural transitions, evolved in Mesopotamia as a result of a societal transition from subsistence economy to an agricultural economy (Leu et al., 2004). Those who could write held the power to control the message. In the early years of the United States, religious missionaries focused on literacy as a way to disseminate religious doctrine (Brandt, 2001). The focus was on reading or copying the Bible, not creating text or writing. In the mid-1800's, the importance of literacy in a democratic society began to drive the need for more literate citizens (Brandt, 2001). Those who could write and have their writing disseminated were able to spread their ideas and affect change. Often these ideas were reactions to oppression and spurned the development of positive social change such as the abolition of slavery, voting rights for African-Americans and women, placement of workplace regulations and the formation of unions. The rise of literacy has been an essential element of empowerment and change for many groups.

New Literacies and 21st Century Skills

In recent years, an abundance of new technologies have emerged, changing the traditional process of writing from the manipulation of alphabetic text to include the use of sound, audio, video, and still images (Kinzer, 2010). Each new platform (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) that emerges has its own rules, constraints, and expectations that can be related to the grammar structure of more traditional texts (Kinzer, 2010). The ability to effectively use these new technologies is now an added element to becoming a good writer and having the benefits that go along with literacy.

Describing the theory of new literacies, Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, and Everett-Cacopardo (2009) include "new skills, strategies, dispositions, and social practices required by new technologies for information and communication" (p. 269). In addition, they indicate that these skills are important for participation in the global community and that they regularly change as technologies develop. These technologies, especially those centering on the Internet (e.g., blogs, video editors, web browsers, instant messaging, list serves, electronic bulletin boards, virtual worlds), require new competencies, strategies, and dispositions for successful use (Kinzer, 2010; Leu et al., 2009). As new technologies emerge, the need for quick learning and adaptation to new requirements increases. These new competencies have come to be understood as 21st century literacy skills and are now a part of standards that teachers are required to use when planning educational instruction. Later I describe these standards as they relate to writing instruction.

Growth and Importance of Writing

With the proliferation of digital tools into literacy, writing has risen in importance and prevalence. Traditionally, the focus of literacy for most people has been on consumption rather than creation. Basic reading skills have long been understood as a gateway for higher education and vocational advancement above the most basic entry level jobs, but writing has not always been necessary or demanded (Brandt, 2015; Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Vocationally important. Economic competition for most industries now expands globally, increasing the need to communicate clearly across a variety of

languages and cultures (Leu et al., 2004). In addition, many workplaces have evolved from top down hierarchies to horizontal organizations in which all levels of employees need to be able to communicate problems and solutions effectively, expanding the need to communicate through writing (Leu et al., 2004). In a seven-year study, Brandt (2015) followed 60 adults who worked in economic sectors that required at least some writing at their jobs. She analyzed their workplace activities and discovered that they wrote significantly more than they read. In fact, according to Brandt (2015), it is likely that many adults spend half of their time at work with their hands on a keyboard. Although this study was done in professions that traditionally call for writing efficacy, it has possible implications for all jobs. The idea that writing must be produced at all levels of vocational organizations, that more time is spent writing at work, and that this writing must be understood across and among cultures indicates the growing importance of writing in the workplace.

Personally empowering. Joyce Armstrong Carroll said that "if students can only read and listen but cannot speak or write… they are robbed of an essential right, the freedom of expression (Carroll & Wilson, 2008, p. 276). Writing allows a person to discover and then create a permanent product of his or her own ideas. This product can then be disseminated and shared with others, who in turn may integrate those ideas into their own understandings, disagree with the ideas, or complement the ideas with their own. Individual and social identities can be developed in a safe writing space, which then allows self-expression and moves a person's ideas forward (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Haddix, 2009).

Garcia et al. (2015) describe the empowering effects of writing on youth of color through their work with the Council of Youth Research. This research followed a group of African-American and Hispanic students from the Los Angeles area as they took part in summer programs. The students identified and researched issues that they considered important to their communities and built multimodal presentations to present their findings. When one group of students displayed their work at a national conference, they were able to see that people were emotionally moved during the presentation. Furthermore, the students were over-whelmed by audience members who wanted to ask them questions and learn more about the topic after their presentation. A student said in a post interview that the experience caused him to identify as a leader and that he felt the responsibility to continue to reach people with his message. This example illustrates the ability of writing to empower students to express their knowledge and to promote civic consciousness.

In another example, Haddix (2009) writes that Black males attend her community writing workshops more than any other racial or gender group, in spite of the research she has indicating that many Black males identify as non-writers. When she asked Black males why they attended, they mentioned needing to write "to survive" (p. 341). These young men have discovered that by writing they can express themselves and thus have power that they have not found elsewhere.

Fear of such empowerment has resulted in the desire to limit literacy processes for particular groups of people throughout history (Carroll & Wilson, 2008). Early leaders in the church did not allow laity to read scripture; rather, it was read and explained to the

masses by priests (Leu et al, 2004). In the United States, as late as the mid-1800's, slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write so as to limit their communication and power as a group. Likewise, when students do not have classrooms that provide effective writing instruction and safe writing environments, they are limited in their writing abilities and in turn do not have the power that good writing affords. If one considers the importance of writing in the workplace, as well as the ability of writing to empower, this lack of writing ability results in debilitating a person socially, vocationally, and academically. It is important, therefore, that teachers and researchers understand how writing works. That is, what processes people go through when writing in order to learn how to better teach this skill. In the next section, I describe two models of writing found in the literature. The first focuses on what is happening in the brain when a person is writing, and the second considers the social and environmental factors that affect writing.

Models of Writing

Writing, both traditional and digital, is a multi-faceted action that can be difficult. It involves the coordination of physical, linguistic, behavioral, and cognitive processes and is highly affected by environmental, social, and cultural factors (Costa et al., 2016; Santangelo, 2014). Writing and writing products have been studied in efforts to understand the complexity of the writing process. From these studies, various models of the writing process have developed. For this research study, two models of writing are of interest. First, the cognitive process model, which emerged from Flower and Hayes's research in the 1980's, illuminates the cognitive aspects of the struggle that students with LD have when writing, which is discussed later in the dissertation (Carroll & Wilson,

2008). Next, the socio-cultural theory of writing takes the focus off the cognitive processes and emphasizes the understanding of writing through the lens of social and cultural factors . Although we know less about the social-cultural factors that specifically affect students with LD, it is constructive to understand the theory, as it informs the need for this study going forward.

Cognitive process model. Until the 1980's, most theories of writing revolved around the clearly defined stages of pre-writing, writing, and revision that were based on the examination of written products and were described as occurring one after another in a set order (Carroll & Wilson, 2008; Flower & Hayes, 1981). In an attempt to explain the types of thinking that individuals went through while writing, rather than focusing on the written product, Flower and Hayes (1981) asked subjects to complete writing pieces while thinking out loud, then studied the transcripts of their thinking. These studies resulted in the cognitive process model of writing that consists of three categories: the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes. The task environment is the context "outside of the writer's skin," including the purpose for writing (e.g., a school assignment) and the evolving text that was produced once the writer began writing (p. 369). The writer's long-term memory includes knowledge of the topic, knowledge of the audience and of any writing strategies or plans the writer may have learned. The writing process was broken down into three sub-processes of planning, translating, and reviewing. All three of these processes are regulated by a "monitor," determined by the writer's own goals which controlled moves from one process to another (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Important to Flower and Hayes's model, which additionally distinguished it from previous thinking about writing, was the idea of hierarchical processes rather than linear processes. When writers spoke their thoughts aloud while writing, they did not follow the three processes of planning, translating, and reviewing in that specific order. Rather, the processes were often embedded within each other, looping through each process multiple times.

In addition to the hierarchical understanding of writing, Flower and Hayes also introduced the idea of writing as goal oriented. Although the writing process seemed to many writers to be unstructured and exploratory, in reality transcripts of their spoken thoughts showed that the writers developed two types of goals: content and process. Content goals involved the overall purpose of the writing, whereas process goals involved how the writer would carry out the goal. These goals then evolved into a network of subsequent goals and sub-goals through which the writer works to convey thoughts to a particular audience in a particular way. Understanding that various writers have different types of goals that guide their writing has become important in understanding the difference between good and poor writers. This theory informs us that short- and long-term memory, executive function skills, and goal setting are cognitive elements that are important in writing.

Socio-Cultural theory of writing. Further defining the process of writing, the socio-cultural theory draws attention away from cognition and focuses on the role of the social environment. This theory is based on the beliefs of Vygotsky that social and cultural contexts affect learning (Barnard & Campbell, 2005). Looking at writing

through a social and cultural lens, one understands writing as a collaborative social activity in which students learn from those who are more experienced (Hodges, 2017). Classroom teachers who embrace this approach provide time for collaboration with both peers and teachers. Prior knowledge, understanding of different genres and audiences, the influences of technology and motivation all affect writing from the viewpoint of the social culturist (Hodges, 2017). For example, students who understand their audience as being the teacher must learn to write differently than if they are writing for friends using social media. This requires prior knowledge as well as a sense of social suaveness, which is understood by the student.

In addition, writing development is influenced and constructed by personal aspects such as professional aspirations, personal motivation, personal insight, and connections with others (Camp, 2012; Carter & Sellman, 2013). Therefore, institutions of power, such as governments, schools, and classrooms, can be restraints on the practices of writers especially when the content, focus, and style of writing do not match that of the students' home literacies (Carter & Sellman, 2013; Muhammad, 2012). Students who do not see themselves as writers or struggle to connect with others in the classroom will struggle to write in that context. The following studies help to demonstrate the importance of social and cultural influences of writing.

Muhammad (2012) illustrates the socio-cultural influence on writing through her study of a five-week, out-of-school writing camp for Black adolescent girls. Sixteen girls between the ages of 11 and 17 participated in the camp ,after being chosen by the camp organizers based on writing samples that identified that they had unique understanding of

themselves as Black girls. The camp was designed as a safe space for this population to express their identities through writing. Activities during the camp included collectively writing a "sister preamble," which they recited at the beginning of each camp, exploring mentor texts written by Black women, and freely writing their own stories without prompts.

After the camp, the researcher conducted a single case study of one of the girls, Iris, through a semi-structured interview and review of her writing from the camp (Muhammad, 2012). Iris indicated that she felt that she had to mask her identity at school to meet teacher expectations and because of censorship, was not able to write what she really wanted to write. She felt that the depth of her identity as African-American and as a teenager was not well understood or explored in the writing she did at school. At the camp, however, she did not have to mask her identity but was encouraged to embrace it. This resulted in a meaningful process in which she was able to address her multiple identities through writing. The result was poems and prose exploring her identity as a light-skinned Black girl. Although this study included only one student, it illustrates how a student's writing can be expanded or changed based on the environment in which it is created. It also indicates the restraints that classrooms can put on student writers who feel their identities are not validated in the classroom discourse or who are required to write within predetermined acceptable boundaries.

It is difficult to find similar studies focusing on students with LD. In one such study, however, Carter and Selman (2013) interviewed seven university students who were identified with dyslexia, a type of LD, and had contact with a university support

center. These students took part in three semi-structured interviews and wrote an essay as part of the study. During the interviews, students were asked questions about how and when they were identified as having dyslexia, how they perceived and approached the essay-writing task, and how they felt about their essay after it was finished. The researchers found that factors, such as the timing of their diagnosis of dyslexia and descriptions of high school writing experiences, mediated the perception of the essay writing experiences during the study. Students with positive writing experiences and who understood and accepted their dyslexia diagnosis described success writing the essay. Enthusiasm for subject matter studied at college and enjoyment of the students' individual departments' style of instruction also resulted in better-reported experiences. A student who had recently received the diagnosis of dyslexia reported negative experiences of essay writing but indicated improvement in academic areas as she learned more about her dyslexia.

The quality of the essays was not analyzed in this study, but the students' perceptions of their writing and the writing process are valuable in that different past experiences mediated current attitudes about writing. Understanding that experiences in earlier school settings and in the current situation made a difference for students is important. This helps us to understand that the social setting, the culture and the background of students affect writing experiences. Understanding these experiences can then inform teachers and researchers when they are designing writing environments.

These two models demonstrate different aspects of the writing process. They also help to illuminate constraints that students may have at school that hinder their writing

success. Taken together with the understanding of literacy as an evolving technology that demands constantly learning new skills, and the growing importance of writing in social, academic and vocational areas, it is clear that we need to understand better ways to construct the writing environment while providing writing instruction to students with LD.

Understanding students with LD is an important process in constructing the appropriate writing environment. In the next section, I take a close look at adolescents with LD. This includes unpacking the meaning of the term and considering the social, emotional, and academic impact of being an adolescent with LD.

Adolescents with LD: Perspectives from Youth Culture and LD Studies

Learning Disability

LD is an umbrella term used to describe a number of specific learning disabilities (SLD). SLD indicates one of the 13 categories in which students can become eligible for special education services as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), first passed in 1975 and that assures all student with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (Yell, 2012). Because LD and SLD are often used interchangeably, I use LD throughout this paper to mean a student who meets the criteria for LD as defined by IDEA. This act defines LD as a disorder of one of the basic psychological processes involved in using or understanding written or spoken language that affects the ability of a person to "listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations" (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8 (c) (10)).The definition includes perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and

developmental aphasia (IDEA, 2004). If a learning problem is primarily a result of a hearing, visual, or motor disability, or an intellectual disability, motion disturbance or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage, it is not considered LD (Pullen et al., 2013). Because of these stipulations, students with the label of LD generally have average to high IQ's and the failure to learn is considered unexpected as there is no apparent explanation (Scanlon, 2018). Students with LD make up the largest number of students in special education in the United States with 36% of students in special education identified as LD (NCES, 2017).

Conceptions of LD. Although LD has long been a part of special education as mandated by federal law, the concept has often been the subject of debate. Factors contributing to the controversy include differences in theoretical outlook, changing political and legal environments, achievements in the field of neurology, the practical needs of students and teachers, and the need for equity in distribution of resources in our public schools (Connor, 2005; Scanlon, 2013). As a result, researchers, theorists, educators, parents, and students often have different conceptions of the label of LD, what it means, and how students who obtain the label should be educated. I briefly review two common stances that affect the current discourse within the field of LD.

Biological. Many within the special education field believe LD are caused by neurological differences in the brain's ability to implement the processes needed to successfully respond to information (Scanlon, 2013). This stance places LD inherent within the individual, often familial and lifelong, although manifestations can be remediated by using research-based methods (Berninger et al., 2008). Believers of this

stance often advocate for psychometric testing and labeling of students with LD in order to provide appropriate remediation of academic deficiencies.

Recent advances in brain imaging have allowed researchers to view brain function while research participants are reading or writing and have shown differences in the brains of people with severe reading and writing problems (Berninger, 2009). At the end of a five-year longitudinal study of the speaking, listening, reading, and writing of typically developing first through fifth grade students, the fifth grade students who did not wear braces were included in a brain imaging study. Using fMRI imaging, brain activity was monitored while students wrote a story (Berninger, 2009). In this study, researchers noted differences in activity between students who were identified as poor or as good writers in the brain region associated with working memory. Studies such as this, showing that specific regions of the brain seem to affect writing ability, as well as a historical understanding of LD, continue to guide the research and beliefs of many in the field.

Indeed, research has shown that many students with LD tend to have poor working memory, short-term memory, and executive functioning skills (Alevriadou & Giaouri, 2015; Swanson, Zheng, & Jerman, 2009). Working memory involves holding new ideas in memory while manipulating it in some way, such as brainstorming and coming up with new ideas. Short-term memory is the ability to hold ideas in memory and recall them such as when remembering the words of a sentence while trying to write it. Swanson et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that compared short-term memory of students with and without reading disabilities. Studies in the meta-analysis

included participants with reading disabilities who scored below the 25th percentile in reading on standardized tests but who were in the normal IQ range. The mean effect sizes of 43 studies (-.61) showed that short-term memory was moderately correlated with reading disability. Forty-six studies that compared working memory of the two groups had a mean effect size of -.67, also indicating a moderate affect between readers with and without disabilities. Although the description of the students included in the studies is congruent with many students with LD, the study did not specifically indicate that these students had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that identified them as such. In addition, the study did not include students with writing disabilities, only reading disabilities. However, because of the likelihood that students with LD in reading also have an LD in writing, it is likely that students with writing disabilities would show similar results and would struggle with working and short-term memory (Berninger et al., 2008).

Another cognitive function of students with LD that researchers have studied is executive functioning. Executive functioning skills are needed to regulate the processes that are used while writing (Alevriadou & Giaouri, 2015). Self-regulation skills such as goal planning, organizing, monitoring, and self-evaluating are included in this category. Alevriadou and Giaouri (2015) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between executive functioning skills and writing with 50 Greek-speaking fifth graders identified as having writing disabilities using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV). They measured executive functioning skills, as well as writing, using standardized assessments and discovered significant Pearson correlations (i.e., .35 and .45) between executive functioning and three different writing functions. These findings

indicated the level of executive functioning skills were moderately predictive of performance on writing assessments.

These studies indicate that students with LD have difficulty with working memory, short-term memory, and executive functioning skills. As discussed earlier, research has shown that these processes are used during writing. Therefore, it is likely that writing problems exhibited by students with LD could stem at least in part to difficulties with certain cognitive functions.

Socially constructed. Many within the special education field believe that LD is socially constructed, a result of environmental or societal factors (Cottrell & Barrett, 2017). Adherents to this school of thought consider learning problems a result of poverty, lack of good education, or cultural biases found in school. Many believe that LD is only manifest in the context of schooling, reasoning that often students with LD succeed outside of the school environment (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Minority and poor students are over represented in special education (Connor, 2005). According to NCES (2017), American Indian and Black students make up the largest number of students in special education at 17% and 16%, respectfully. Within the socially constructed paradigm, some believe that school systems discriminate against minority students by using the LD label rather than considering better ways to teach students. Conversely, others believe the LD label is used to differentiate low-performing students who are in higher socio-economic classes from low performing students in lower socio-economic classes (Scanlon, 2013). Evidence of this belief is the higher socio-economic status of people diagnosed with LD over that of intellectual disability or

emotional behavioral disability (Connor, 2005). Adherents of the belief that LD is a social construct often advocate for community-based schools that are cognizant of cultural and ethical norms, flexibility in the curriculum, and wider understanding of normality (Gresham & Vellutino, 2010).

Because of the different concepts of LD mentioned here, disparity exists among schools as to the process of identifying students. Yet, because students must be determined eligible for special education before an IEP is implemented to set goals and specify how these goals will be reached, identification is extremely important (Yell, 2012). In the next section, I discuss how students are identified as LD in the United States.

Identification. The lack of a clear definition of LD leads to differences in how LD is identified (Scanlon, 2013). IDEA originally mandated that LD be diagnosed using what is called the discrepancy model in which achievement scores did not match potential based on IQ scores (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). This mode of identification has largely been proven ineffective through studies that show little or no difference between groups of students who have discrepancies between IQ and achievement and those who do not (Berninger et al., 2008; Gresham & Vellutino, 2010).

In 2004, changes to IDEA allowed, but did not mandate, the use of tiered instructional models or other unspecified research-based methods to determine eligibility for special education (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2011). Individual states are now allowed to determine the process that will be used for eligibility in special education but are not required to provide detailed specifications to individual school systems to determine the

process. Thus, procedures used to determine if a student is identified as having LD vary from state to state and school system to school system within states (Maki, Floyd, & Roberson, 2015).

In 2015, Maki et al. conducted a study of the eligibility guidelines and practices of all 50 states and Washington, DC. Researchers first found eligibility and legal documents from each of the states online, then contacted each state government to assure that the documents they found were the materials in use at that time. Forty-nine states responded and confirmed that appropriateness of the material they had found. These documents were read and coded using variables that fell into the five following categories: definition, general eligibility, achievement areas, exclusionary criteria, and identification method. Results of the study found that states determine eligibility for special education in a variety of ways that are not always specifically defined. For example, 67% of all states still allowed the use of the discrepancy method in determining eligibility and only 16% of states required the use of tiered models. Four states required the testing of psychological or neurological processes as part of the eligibility determination. Some states required that lack of school attendance be considered as an exclusionary factor, while others required that inadequate instruction in mathematics and reading be considered before identifying a student with LD. In addition to highly divergent methods used between states, it was found that many states did not give specific guidance to individual school systems as to how tiered systems were to be implemented. As a result of this lack of specificity, individual school systems are highly divergent in how students are given the label of LD.

A study by Maki and colleagues of 376 school psychologists reflected the disparity of how students are determined to be LD across the United States. Psychologists were given scenarios of student test scores and grades and were told to make eligibility decisions using certain methods for which they were given guidelines. Results showed that psychologists self-identified that they were less confident about their decision when making eligibility decisions based on tiered decision models than when using discrepancy models. In addition, they struggled with decisions when a student's scores were close to a criterion point and decisions were inconsistent from case to case. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that students identified with LD in the United States exhibit a range of symptoms and abilities. Thus, the amount of resources in a school, the economic and social environment, the influence of parents, and the understanding of teachers all influence the rate of student referrals to special education (Maki, Burns, & Sullivan, 2018).

The lack of a clear definition of LD is apparent in the body of LD research as well. Williams, Miciak, McFarland, and Wexler (2016) systematically reviewed and coded empirical studies from the *Journal of Learning Disabilities, Learning Disabilities Quarterly,* and *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* in order to gain insight into how participants with LD are identified. Articles appearing from 2001 to 2013 that reported novel results of an empirical study, included participants with LD, and disaggregated results of LD participants were included in the study. The researchers found that 21% of the 284 articles included in the study did not indicate who or how students were identified as LD. The discrepancy model was used in about 30% of the

studies to identify students as LD, and low achievement was also used in about 30% of the articles. This study illustrates the lack of clarity that exists in knowing who these students with LD are, what their abilities are, and how they are identified.

Understanding the different perspectives of LD and the ambiguity associated with determining eligibility makes clear that students with LD are likely heterogeneous in their academic, social, and emotional abilities. While the next section of this paper describes general characteristics of students with LD, especially in regards to writing, it is important to keep in mind that individual students with LD greatly differ in manifestations of the label. Regardless of the diagnosis of having LD and of the existence of writing goals on an IEP, students vary greatly in their abilities and understanding of writing.

Writing characteristics. Students with LD often struggle significantly with writing in school and into adulthood (Berninger et al., 2008; Graham, Collins, & Rigby-Wills, 2017). It has been consistently demonstrated over time that students with LD score lower than their typically achieving peers in various measures of writing. Graham et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of 53 studies (i.e., journal articles, dissertations, reports, and book articles) ranging from 1973-2013 of the writing of K-12 students. Reporting only on elements of writing in which there were at least six studies, researchers showed that students with LD scored over one standard deviation less than typical students in writing quality, organization, and conventions. In addition, students with LD scored significantly lower than their peers in vocabulary (-.89), sentence fluency (-.81), genre elements (-.82), output (-.87), and motivation (-.42). Whereas Graham and his

colleagues did not consider the year of the study as a mediating factor, the overall large effect sizes indicate that students with LD continue to struggle to write well.

In a recent longitudinal study of 122 children and 244 adults with dyslexia, a form of LD, Berninger et al. (2008) found children scored one standard deviation below the general population mean in handwriting, spelling, and overall quality of written composition. Adults with LD scored one-third of a standard deviation below the mean of the general population in measures of writing composition, indicating that the writing struggles for students with LD can continue into adulthood.

Given that writing is important in academic, social, and workplace settings, it is likely that students with LD will be challenged in these areas when they struggle to write well. While struggles with writing may perpetuate problems for students with LD, it is important to consider other aspects of students with LD that go beyond their academic characteristics.

Social-emotional aspects. As previously shown, students are identified as having LD based on academic indicators. Social or emotional aspects of LD are not considered in the process of identification. However, many studies have shown that students with LD are affected beyond the academic sphere having frequent anxiety, social adjustment problems, and behavior difficulties (Fuller-Thomson, Carroll, & Yang, 2018; Majorano et al., 2017; Pullen et al., 2013).

A recent study involving teenagers compared 293 typical students and 50 students with LD to determine differences in emotional well-being (Majorano et al., 2017). All students were administered psychometric scales that measured emotional factors,

including self-esteem, self-concept, perceived quality of friendships, and loneliness. Of particular note, the results showed that students with LD had higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of self-concept than students without LD.

A survey administered in 2012 by the Canadian Community Health Services indicated that adults with LD were 46% more likely to attempt suicide than their counterparts without LD, after accounting for known risk factors of suicide (Fuller - Thompson et al., 2018). Although self-reported by adult participants, this study shows the possibility that LD could be a risk factor in suicide attempts.

While the research is not clear on the reasons why students with LD struggle emotionally and socially, hypotheses include the likelihood of co-morbid conditions such as ADHD or depression, the possibility that cognitive processing deficits also cause social problems, and that failure in school creates low self-esteem and self-concept (Pullen et al., 2013). These studies and others raise concern that students with LD suffer emotionally and socially in addition to their academic problems.

In summary, although there are a range of definitions for LD and opinions of how LD should be identified, there is ample information confirming that students in school with LD struggle to write more so than students without an LD identification. Furthermore, research shows that many of these students have additional difficulties with social, emotional, or behavioral problems. In addition, many students with LD are adolescents, a label that comes with real, as well as constructed, characteristics influencing the way students are positioned in society, the ways they view themselves,

and ultimately the ways in which they learn (Lesko, 2012). A consideration of youth cultural studies helps us to consider the adolescent status of students with LD.

Students with LD as Adolescents

Youth cultural studies focus on the practices of young people across a variety of spaces and settings in an effort to provide an alternative narrative to commonly held beliefs about adolescence (Moje, 2002). Unfortunately, concepts related to adolescence are often driven by dominant cultural narratives that are neither accurate nor positive portrayals of many youth (Moje, 2002). Often these narratives describe youth as struggling, out of control, deviant, or hormonal (Bruce, 2008). Bruce demonstrates the dichotomy between how youth see themselves personally and how they are portrayed in literature and popular culture through a description of an inquiry unit that took place in his 9th–12th grade elective communications class. At the beginning of the school year, students were asked to bring 10 objects to class that represented various aspects of their lives. Objects included nametags from work, pictures of significant others (e.g., family, friends), hobby items, and items representing school activities. Bruce kept a list of the all the objects shared. Later in the year, students were asked to find and bring in print advertisements, commercials, video clips, and movie clips that portray teenagers. After viewing various media collected, students made a list of adjectives describing how the media portrayed teenagers. They sorted these adjectives into five groups and built the following five categories representing each group: Lazy, Partier, Sexually Promiscuous, Vandals, and Undependable (Bruce, 2015). After these categories were compiled, Bruce then presented the students with the list of objects from the introductory activity at the

beginning of the school year, and they made categories using the same process as described earlier. The new list of categories proved to be very different from the first: Family, Friends, Worker, Student, Hobbies, and Media Consumers. While this example comes from only one class in one school, it demonstrates a dichotomy that exists between whom adolescents are and how they are portrayed in popular culture. Perceptions from popular media were quite different than the students' own perceptions.

Haddix and Sealy-Ruiz (2012) cite evidence that the dichotomy between the reality of who youth are and society's general conception of youth is even more evident when considering youth of color. They describe interviews in which school leaders indicate that news stories about Black boys being arrested on drug charges in the school neighborhood prompt policies that are designed to control rather than empower learning. For example, if Black boys are texting or using digital media, the administration in such schools may suspect that the students are selling drugs or participating in other deviant behavior and move to ban digital devices. Strikingly different are attitudes about digital media in suburban schools that are racially balanced. Administrators and teachers in these schools, according to Haddix and Sealy-Ruiz, are more likely to encourage students to use cell phones to participate in literacy activities. Therefore, while there is a tendency to inappropriately portray youth in general in derogatory terms and to make efforts to exert control over movement and activities, this tendency seems to be more pervasive when applied to male students of color.

Proponents of youth cultural studies assert that this misconception of who youth are leaves policy makers, administrators, parents, and others who work with adolescents

to focus on the need to protect and control them (Lesko, 2012). Lesko (2012) describes the transition from junior high to middle schools in the late 1980's as a way for society to provide for the "problems of young adolescence" (p. 79). These "problems" that Lesko believes were constructed socially, included the idea that students at this age were likely to make wrong decisions that would put them on a path of chaos and disorder. As a result, middle schools were designed to provide more structure and adult supervision. Large groups of students, a characterization of junior high schools, were broken into smaller groups and students moved from one teacher to another in teams rather than from class to class based on individual schedules. This organization promoted much more control of movement and of academic activities. Therefore, students in middle school find themselves in adult-monitored environments throughout the day. In *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, boyd (2014) says teens describe adults as "lurking, listening in, hovering, and being in my business," (p. 70). One of the dominant reasons that youth she interviewed give for their desire to use social media is that they perceive these spaces to be free of adult monitoring. By using social media to avoid parental or adult supervision, teens have developed new literacy practices.

Moje (2002) argues that online practices adolescents have developed have value and that effort should be made to study out-of-school literacy practices of students in order to learn how to better engage them at school. Whereas curriculum standards and standardized testing often add to the idea that students are vessels to be filled, proponents of youth culture believe that this leaves some students unmotivated and less likely to be successful in school. Rather, Moje (2002) argues that we should consider adolescents as

resources and study them in order to find ways to better teach them. Alvermann (2017) described the sophisticated literacies students may develop after observing a student described as a struggling reader. This student had become proficient in using online resources to learn and discuss the complicated rules of Pokémon, a common card and online game. In spite of the student's reading deficits at school, he was able to navigate the web and use a variety of media (pictures, videos, text, numbers, and oral language) to sophisticatedly communicate his knowledge of the game (Alvermann, 2017). By understanding how the student navigated the technology to learn the game and discuss it with others, teachers were able to learn more about his abilities and how he learned.

Considering the lack of agency afforded to adolescence due to societal constructs as discussed previously, as well as what we know about the consequences of the LD label, how these students are taught has significance. In the next section, I show what we know through research about how students with LD are currently being taught to write in school and synthesize the research in writing for students with LD.

The Teaching of Writing to Students with LD

Federal laws and policies as well as mandated national, state, and local standards influence writing instruction for students with LD**.** In addition, classroom time restraints, teacher preparation, and localized school norms influence the teaching of writing in classrooms (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Hawkins & Razali, 2012; Hutchison & Colwell, 2015; Pardo, 2006; Graham & Harris, 2013a; Troia & Maddox, 2004; Vue et al., 2016; Yell, 2012). In this section, I discuss ways that IDEA and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) impact the teaching of writing for students with LD and the research

that has been conducted. I also review the research base that explores effective ways to teach writing to students with LD.

Policies and Standards

IDEA. IDEA mandates that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment, most often considered to be a placement with typically achieving peers. The act also requires that teachers use research-based methods when teaching students with disabilities (Yell, 2012). As a result of this law, many students with LD receive instruction in inclusive classrooms with students in special education as well as typical students (NCES, 2017).

In fact, the number of students with LD who are taught in general education classes with typical peers at least 80% of the time has greatly increased in recent years (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011). In 2016, 68.8% of students with LD were taught in general education classes most of the time (NCES, 2017). This number indicates that whereas decisions about educational placement continue to be made by IEP teams on an individual basis, the likelihood is that most students with LD will be taught in inclusive general education classrooms. Often these students have IEPs requiring support from a special education teacher within the general education classroom.

These integrated classes are supposed to be staffed by a general education teacher and special education teacher who are to work together to support and instruct all students using research-based methods. Classrooms with both a general and special education teacher are often called inclusive or referred to as co-taught classes. Because

most middle school students with LD are taught in inclusive general education classes, it is important to consider the characteristics of these classrooms and their effects on student achievement.

Researchers have identified characteristics of co-taught classrooms that can result in positive student achievement. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) describe the main benefit of co-taught classrooms as the exposure the students get to both teachers. Factors that have been found to coincide with effective instruction for students with LD in inclusive classrooms are positive teacher attitudes, administrative support, effective teacher training, and time to co-plan effectively (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Scruggs et al., 2007). Within those classrooms, good instructional practices such as paced and scaffolded large group instruction, small groupings that allow for individualized assistance, and independent practice with high levels of success, increase the likelihood of favorable outcomes for students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). How the teachers provide this instruction is important.

A recent study of inclusive middle school classrooms throughout the United States reported on the practices of co-teaching teams (Wexler et al., 2018). Researchers observed 16 pairs of special and general education teachers in English Language Arts classrooms at marked intervals throughout an entire school year. In these classrooms, they found that students were reading aloud with the whole class or independently reading without teacher support 86.5% of the time. Thus, the special education teacher was mostly monitoring students during the bulk of classroom time, rather than providing individualized support. Most of the time, general education teachers led the class, while

the special education teachers supported or monitored the students. Thirty-three percent of the time the teachers co-led the class.

While this research only considered 16 teacher dyads and did not report how these schools or teachers were chosen for research, it outlines some of the strengths as well as some of the drawbacks of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. In these cases, much of the student time was spent independently reading or in whole class instruction rather than activities that allowed interactions with the two teachers in the classroom. Because the general education teachers led most whole group instruction and this type of instruction was the most prevalent, opportunities to be exposed to the special education teacher were limited. Positive aspects included the possibility that students could be supported during independent work times, as well as increased engagement due to teacher monitoring. This research shows that how teachers in a co-taught classroom work to structure and conduct the instructional activities in the classroom can make evident differences in the quality of the instruction.

In spite of the prevalence of inclusion classrooms and knowledge about how to make these classroom work well, the effectiveness of this setting over other settings for students with LD has not been settled by research (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). For example, Murawski (2006) studied the results of test scores of 38 ninth grade students in three different conditions—co-taught classrooms, inclusive classroom without a special education teacher, and resource classrooms. Students in this study were placed in the resource classroom based on their IEP. Students with LD in general education were randomly divided between the co-taught class and the inclusive classroom without a

general education teacher. Students were given pre- and post-assessments to determine improvement in reading and writing. Results showed no significant differences between students with LD in the three conditions. Although the arrangement of randomly placing students in a condition rather than stipulating placement on their IEP is ethically questionable, the lack of significant difference in the results of the study highlight the lack of evidence of the effectiveness of co-taught classrooms.

Whereas, IDEA requires that students with disabilities be taught in the least restrictive environment, teachers are also required to adhere to state and local standards. Many states have adopted versions of the CCSS as the basis for academic instruction in all classrooms. The next section considers how writing instruction for students is addressed in these standards.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS were developed in an effort led by National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers in 2009 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.). By 2016, forty-six states and the District of Columbia had adopted CCSS, which govern the content as well as the processes through which students are taught many of the content areas and literacy (Graham & Harris, 2013a). Common Core (CC) writing standards for all grade levels are divided into four main areas: (a) text types and purposes, (b) production and distribution of writing, (c) research to build and present knowledge, and (d) range of writing—short and extended (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Thus, CCSS call for a combination of process writing focusing on such aspects as planning, drafting, revising, and editing as well as focus on product including genres and conventions

(Graham & Harris, 2013a). CCSS provide explicit details of what each genre should include as well as dictates which conventions and genres should be mastered at each grade level (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

CCSS also incorporate the use of digital tools throughout the English Language Arts standards (Hutchinson & Colwell, 2015). These standards stipulate that students should be able to use digital tools and resources to both produce and publish writing, including multimodal writing. They emphasize the importance of students being able to determine the credibility of multiple sources and to be able to integrate information from these sources without plagiarizing.

Although IDEA and CCSS stipulate that students with disabilities are to be taught using research-based practices in the least restrictive environment, I look, in the next two sections, at what recent research shows to be actually happening in classrooms across the United states in regards to teaching writing to students with LD and what the research tells us about the most effective ways for teaching these students.

Current Teaching Practices

Research shows that many teachers find teaching traditional writing skills while incorporating 21st century literacies to be difficult (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015; Pardo, 2006; Troia & Maddox, 2004), and they indicate that they may not have enough time or training to teach writing effectively (Troia & Graham, 2017; Troia & Maddox, 2004). In a recent nation-wide survey of randomly selected teachers in states that use CCSS, 141 third–eighth grade general education teachers responded to a 123-item survey designed to learn how teachers taught writing to students with LD and how well they felt they were

prepared for this task. Only 20% of the respondents reported that they took a course that was totally devoted to teaching writing during their pre-service preparation. Additionally, 20% respondents said that they had no coursework during their pre-teaching instruction in how to teach writing (Troia & Graham, 2017). Teachers were not asked how much or if their preparation for teaching writing included information about teaching students with disabilities.

Even teachers who do have training and knowledge about teaching writing are not always able to implement their knowledge due to overcrowded schedules or school policies. Pardo (2006) conducted a yearlong case study, interviewing and observing three elementary school teachers who were in their first five years of teaching. These teachers had completed a yearlong internship in the urban district in which they were teachers during the study. During interviews, all three teachers discussed constraints in their ability to teach writing the way they believed it should be taught. One teacher lamented that the requirements of the Reading First grant that the school received to combat low reading scores in the past (90 minutes of each day used to teach reading in a highly prescribed way) made it difficult to spend the time needed to teach writing effectively. Another teacher was discouraged to hold writing workshop type activities due to school norms of quiet, teacher-led classrooms. The writing workshop would have involved students writing and conferencing in groups while the teacher worked with individual students, an activity that is likely to be noisy and appear uncontrolled. Another factor reported that restrained the teaching of writing was the implementation of standardized tests. Because the administration wanted students to do well on these tests, a writing

coach met with teachers regularly to demonstrate ways to teach strategies using direct instruction, which did not allow for choice or creativity in writing.

Limitations of this study include that these three teachers were in their first five years of teaching, and thus, their inexperience may have played a part in the results of the study. In addition, the study took place before the CC standards were adopted. Still, the findings are on par with other findings that students do little writing at school and that there is a perceived need to focus on test preparation as is exemplified in the following study.

In 2011, Applebee and Langer conducted The National Survey of Writing Instruction, again just before the CC standards were adopted. This study involved 260 English, mathematics, social studies, and science teachers at 20 different middle and high schools, described as having good reputations for teaching writing. Data collected included classroom observations, writing samples of 138 students, and interviews of these same students as well as 220 of their teachers and principals. A national survey of 1,520 teachers was used to supplement the findings. Based on the observations and writing samples, students wrote about 1.6 pages per week in their English classes and 2.1 pages a week for all their additional subjects combined (Applebee & Langer, 2011). During observations, only 19% of the student writing consisted of more than one paragraph, with most pieces not requiring analysis, composing, or interpretation, but consisting of short answers or summaries of reading. During interviews, teachers said they did not assign long writing assignments because they did not have time to read and respond as they needed to prepare students for high stakes testing and needed the time for

other types of instruction. On the survey, teachers indicated spending 90% of their teaching time directly teaching skills such as how to generate ideas, plan, draft or revise. While being observed, students used technology in some form less than five percent of the time and the most frequent use of technology in writing was to create a final copy of writing to turn in for grading.

This study concluded that students most often experience direct instruction during class and that students are spending little time writing at school. Additionally, most of their writing experiences resulted in short pieces. Although the authors stated that approximately half of the students who were interviewed and whose writing was collected were low achievers, it did not provide the percentage of students who had disabilities or attempt to identify the cause of low achievement. Considering that national statistics indicate that 34% of students in special education have LD, we can speculate that it is likely this sample included students with LD (NCES, 2017).

Given that most students with LD often receive instruction from both special and general education teachers, Trioa and Maddox (2004) conducted a study to learn whether the two groups differed in their approach to teaching writing. They conducted focus groups with special and general education middle school teachers about their instruction and attitudes toward teaching writing to students with disabilities. The two focus groups took place one year apart with the first group consisting of eight special education teachers from six middle schools and the second group consisting of 10 general education teachers from the same district but different schools than schools represented in the first group. During interviews, the general education teachers commented most about the

need to teach writing across instructional areas and to use process writing while special education teachers talked about the need to motivate students. Teachers from both groups, however, indicated that they most often used explicit instruction to teach writing skills and strategies, similar to findings in the Applebee and Langer study (2011).

The second most frequently used teaching strategy mentioned by both groups was informal or incidental teaching, such as that which occurs naturally when a student misuses a rule in his/her writing and the teacher then teaches the correct grammar. Both groups of teachers mentioned that grammar, punctuation, and spelling were important. Over 50% of special education teachers indicated that they taught grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization more than other types of writing strategies.

Middle school students interviewed by Vue and colleagues (2016) described more writing than teachers in the Applebee and Langer study (2011). As part of a study to develop a universal design writing tool, the researchers held five focus groups consisting of a total of 41 middle school students with and without disabilities in sixth–eighth grade. When students were asked by researchers to name the kinds of writing that they do at school, the top five categories mentioned were the five-paragraph essay, responses to literature, letters of a topic they were given by a teacher, comparison essays, and in-class journaling about books that they read for school (Vue et al., 2016).

Research has provided a snapshot of the types of writing instruction that students with and without disabilities are receiving in general education classrooms. Students are learning process skills as well as focusing on specific genres along with conventions and

grammar. Most of their writing is short, teacher directed, and does not require analysis, synthesis or interpretation.

Due to policies that attach high stakes to standards-based instruction, focus is often on standardized testing. Students with LD are most often being taught in general education classroom but regardless of placement, are receiving direct instruction that emphasizes structure and grammar. Technology is used most often for producing text. Twenty first century skills such as the ability to synthesize large amounts of information and communicate it to various groups of people are not actively being taught. Little is known about how the writing of students with LD is affected by this emphasis on standards-based instruction in inclusive classrooms. In the next section, I review the research base in teaching writing to students with LD.

Research-Based Methods for Teaching Writing to Students with LD

As explained previously, IDEA calls for students with disabilities to be instructed using researched-based practices that have been proven to be effective (Yell, 2012). This has resulted in a number of studies looking for ways to teach students to write that will show evidence of positive results in short periods of time.

In 2014, Gillespie and Graham conducted a meta-analysis of 43 experimental, quasi-experimental, and within-subject studies that tested strategies to teach writing to LD students in grades one through twelve. Results found four types of writing instruction that resulted in significant positive effect sizes. These are process writing, dictation, goal setting, and strategy instruction. Process writing usually involves students following the stages of writing (e.g., planning, drafting, revising) with authentic purposes

and audiences. Instruction is direct but not explicit as problems are targeted as they arise. This type of writing can be taught with or without the use of digital technology but is enhanced by the use of various digital tools that aid the writing process (DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl & Hicks, 2010).

Dictation involve speaking into a tape recorder or to an adult who records the story. This strategy was found to be effective for students who struggle with handwriting. Goal-setting studies simply involved having students set a goal before they began writing. The strategy instruction category included explicit teaching of writing strategies. Seven of these studies (out of 11) tested Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD), which is a framework for strategy instruction that combines scaffolding and support. This framework was determined to be an evidence-based practice based on standards set by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in 2005 (Baker et al., 2009).

Strategy instruction. Strategy instruction was found to have the highest average effect size at 1.09, almost double the next highest, which was goal setting at .57. When calculated separately, the SRSD studies had a greater effect size than the other strategy instruction studies. It is important to note that Gillespie and Graham's study (2014) included as a limitation that the quality of studies was not always robust and the small sample of some of the investigations (e.g., four studies for goal setting) limited the usefulness of the results. It is also important to note that one of the authors of this study is a co-creator of the SRSD framework (Baker et al., 2009). Regardless, the high effect

sizes found in this study indicated that SRSD might be an effective instructional technique for students with LD.

Whereas SRSD and other types of direct instruction can be helpful to teachers who are considering ways to remediate specific writing skills, we still do not know how this type of instruction is being conducted in regular classrooms and how students with LD experience and process writing across the curriculum even when they receive this type of instruction. Because the nature of the method is memorization of a specific skill, the writing done to reinforce the skill is usually short and based on teacher-directed topics (Baker et al, 2009). Other ways to help students improve their writing should be considered, especially addressing the use of digital technology and multimodal writing.

Multimodal writing and digital technology. In this section, I describe research that reviews the use of digital technology and multimodal writing to teach writing to students with LD. As previously mentioned, writing is no longer considered to be singularly text based but includes multiple ways of expressing ideas. Multimodal writing refers to writing that utilizes visual, audio, textual, gestural or spatial modes along with text to communicate ideas (Bruce et al., 2013). Although digital writing is often used in multimodal writing, the two terms are not interchangeable. Digital writing, which usually refers to writing done with an electronic device, is not always multimodal and multimodal writing does not always include digital technology. For example, traditional materials such as poster board, construction paper, paint, chalk, and markers can be included in multimodal writing (Bomer, Zoch, David, & Ok, 2010). There is some evidence that encouraging multimodal ways of presenting information can improve a

student's traditional writing skills as well as promote better communication of ideas (Bruce et al., 2013). The first study I review provides an overview of the types of digital technologies that have been researched in regard to improving writing for students with LD.

The use of digital technology in writing instruction for students with LD has been studied since the advent of the personal computer in the 1980's. Peterson-Karlan (2011) conducted a descriptive research synthesis of studies that used technological tools to provide writing instruction to students with LD or learning problems. Peterson-Karlan found 85 applied studies that took place between 1984 and 2010. It is significant to note that in the final five years that the project surveyed, few studies were found that met criteria, in spite of the fact that the digital tools had greatly increased in both number and prevalence during this time.

Most of these studies (44) involved technology that aided students with lower-level writing aspects (i.e., mechanics, syntax, and spelling). This included software that utilized keyboarding, speech to text, and spell checking. Thirty-nine studies addressed higher-level concerns such as editing, revising, and planning. The Peterson-Karlan study did not indicate the effectiveness of the studies, but this information gives an idea of what has been studied and indicates a need for more recent studies using technology that aids all aspects of writing.

As mentioned previously, multimodal writing does not always involve digital technology. A case study of fourth graders who completed memoirs using concrete materials such as paper boxes, string, and ink, demonstrates how multimedia can be used

to help students improve their own writing (Bomer et al., 2010). Participants in the study were students in a fourth-grade classroom that was 88% Latino and 94% economically disadvantaged. The multimedia projects involved creating memoirs using both text and visual elements. Students began by writing their stories in notebooks and then choosing ways to represent their ideas visually. In two specific cases, students in the classroom were able to improve their text after making visual representations. One student, Daniel, wrote a brief story about his family's visit to the zoo. After writing, he drew detailed pictures of the visit. As he drew, he remembered many details that he did not include in the originally story. He was then able to go back and add information to his story, increasing the richness and overall quality of the piece.

Another student, Letitia, used cartoon panels to describe her story in six individual steps. This technique facilitated her thinking as she considered details of the event in sequence. She then used these panels as a guide when returning to her text resulting in more details throughout the story.

In both of the cases described, student writing was improved by the use of concrete materials to tell the story. This study does not indicate if the students struggled with writing or were diagnosed with LD. However, the fact that writing was improved indicates the potential of the use of multimedia materials to help improve writing for all students. Some research studies have considered how to facilitate multimodal writing for students with LD through the use of digital technology.

In two collective case studies, Edwards-Groves (2011) showed the effects of multimodal writing projects. The case studies were part of an action research plan in

which two schools in Australia were committed to learning ways to improve learning through technology. Facilitators demonstrated lessons at the schools and provided assistance to teachers in between visits. Data were collected through teacher interviews and focus groups, class observations, and a student focus group. Students participating in the studies said that using multimodal writing (i.e., PowerPoints that used animated diagrams) helped them to better understand their topic, as they had to really comprehend the details of the material before being able to create a moving diagram. In addition, students indicated that the digital nature of the study motivated them to spend more time and effort in the research and creation of the project than if they had created a pencil and paper product.

When students were asked about their experiences learning to use the software, it was found that much of their learning happened at home in a form of self-teaching. Their teacher had begun the process at school, and they finished learning at home. The multimodal nature of the project resulted in students spending more time on their work, learning the topic area in more detail, and extending their learning into the home space. The authors did not note if any of the students in the classrooms that took part in this study had LD or struggled to write. However, the success of using multimedia for the students in the study indicate that this is an area that merits consideration for students with LD.

Jacobs and Fu (2014) conducted a case study of two fourth grade students with LD to discover how they progressed in writing throughout the school year in the context of preparing for a high-stakes test, while also participating in a digital storytelling project.

The authors collected writing samples, interviewed the teacher and students, and observed the classroom throughout the school year. Each 11-year-old student was diagnosed with LD and struggle significantly with writing. The teacher structured her schedule to provide high stakes writing preparation in the mornings and worked on digital storytelling in the afternoon. During the testing preparation, one student, Julia, struggled to get started with her writing and raised her hand often to ask for help. Her writing showed poor planning, organization, sentence structure, grammar, and spelling. Another student, Tyrone, had trouble sitting quietly, getting started with his writing, and generating ideas. He typically gave up on the assignment early in the process. In preparing their digital story, both students wrote scripts, organized their plans, used supporting details, and provided visuals and audio to complement their stories. Tyrone had no trouble beginning the project, drew his own pictures, and added his voice to the program at the end, while Julia used exaggeration to expand her story, collaborated with friends to improve word choice, added pictures and videos brought from home, and actively shared her expertise to help others with the project. The authors noted that the students who struggled with traditional writing seemed to focus on their strengths rather than deficits and that they no longer seemed to be disabled writers while working on the digital story. Although this case study included only two students and the authors did not provide an audit trail or details about how they came to their conclusions, the study did provide ample writing examples and quotes that helped the reader to see the benefits of the digital storytelling project.

In sum, research for students with LD has focused on the need to find evidence-based practices that result in improved writing skills. Often this research focuses on traditional writing methods studied in isolation outside of the context of the regular classroom environment. Research in the use of digital technology is overwhelmingly focused on lower-level writing skills. Initial research in the area of multimodal writing using digital technology has shown its potential to improve both traditional and 21st century writing skills for students with LD.

Summary

Adolescents with LD often struggle to write both in and out of school and into adulthood (Berninger et al., 2008). Furthermore, they often fail to thrive in content area classes due to the amount of writing required (Graham et al., 2017). Effective writing is an important social tool and most vocations require writing competency; thus, students with LD who struggle to write continue to be plagued by their lack of writing skills as adults (Brandt, 2015).

In recent years an abundance of digital technologies have emerged that have changed the process and content of traditional writing (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015). These digital tools as well as the proliferation of social media have resulted in a need for students to be adept in 21st century literacies rather than simply traditional writing. The new emphasis on 21st century literacies can have both positive and negative impact on the ability of students with LD to succeed as writers (Kinzer, 2010).

In order to improve writing instruction for students with LD and to prepare them for success in the 21st century, we need to learn how they process, use, understand, and

adapt to the ever-changing skills needed to write well in and out of school. It is understood among researchers who study marginal communities that the opinions, culture, and norms of stakeholders are important for results to have impact (Alkin, 2011). This includes soliciting and considering the input of youth, who are often stereotyped with misrepresented understandings of adolescence that do not match who they are or value their current status (Lesko, 2012; Moje, 2002). Understanding the complex context of their learning environment, as well as their perceptions of their writing experience, may help to pinpoint the areas of difficulty that students with LD have. Having a clearer understanding of the problem that comes from the students with LD's perspective can impact the questions that researchers ask as well as impact the goals of educators and researchers. This is important for the field of LD as we seek to create better educational outcomes for this population. In chapter three, I describe how this study answers the following questions:

1. In what ways do students with LD experience writing at home and at school?
2. How do students with LD perceive writing?
3. What factors help or hinder the writing of students with LD?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this multiple case study is to better understand how middle school students with learning disabilities (LD) experience and perceive writing. It portrays the writing experience in the context of the students' learning environment while strongly considering the viewpoint of the student participants. The focus on student viewpoint is important, as only those with lived experience can fully understand a phenomenon (Mertens, 2007). The results may inform researchers and teachers when considering how to best design instruction to teach writing to students with LD (Robinson, Fisher, & Strike, 2014).

The central research questions are:

1. In what ways do students with LD experience writing at home and at school?
2. How do students with LD perceive writing?
3. What factors help or hinder the writing of students with LD?

Multiple Case Study Design

This project used a multiple case study approach in order to gain a holistic understanding of the writing experiences of three students with LD. Case study approach is considered useful in educational research as a way to bring about a deep understanding of the phenomenon that can help to improve practice (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2012)

considers case studies particularly appropriate in situations where the subject being studied cannot be separated from the context or controlled by the researcher. Student experiences are affected by contextual factors that vary with community, school, classroom, and personal environments. Inclusion classrooms have an additional layer of complexity determined by special and general education teacher personalities, relationships and expertise (Friend et al., 2010). For each school and classroom setting, these predictable and unpredictable factors are different based on the culture of the school and classroom. Therefore, a clear understanding of student experiences requires a study that takes place in the natural environment and fully describes the context of the setting. Case study provides an understanding of the classroom context as well as the external and internal factors affecting the individual student, placing the findings within the real-life setting of the research participants (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995).

With thick description and understanding of the context, case study design helps researchers to better understand the circumstances as to why or how this situation or problem has occurred. Merriam (1998) describes this understanding as an "insight into how things got to be the way they are," (p. 30). Thick description of student and teacher experiences and insights from a variety of sources illuminate the combined effects of the student experience in and out of the classroom. This insight or "hindsight of the past," can then be applicable to the present and used to create new knowledge (Merriam, 1998)

In this study, each of the three middle school student participants was a case, and cases were analyzed individually and collectively. The context of the cases included the community, school, and classroom where the study took place as well as the individual

home experiences as described by each student. Whereas this holistic understanding of middle school students with LD is specific to the situation, it illuminates general problems, resulting in new understandings of the writing experiences of students with LD (Merriam, 1998).

Participant Selection

Purposeful selection is necessary when the aim is to investigate a particular phenomenon, as the selection must be made from cases in which that phenomenon exists (Maxwell, 2013). A form of purposeful selection is criteria-based sampling in which the researcher lists a set of criteria and chooses a case based on those criteria (Merriam, 1998).

Classroom Selection

Criteria-based sampling was used to select a classroom for this study. The criteria stated that the classroom include both general education students and students who have a diagnosis of LD in writing under the rules of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that includes goals for writing. In addition, at least one teacher in the classroom needed to understand and embrace the use of 21st century literacies and use at least some digital technology as a part of classroom instruction. The teacher needed to be willing to have a researcher participant spend a considerable amount of time in the classroom, be willing to participate in interviews about his or her teaching and be willing to allow the researcher to immerse herself in class and student activities. In addition, the administration, both at the building and

district level, needed to allow research to take place in the school. Secondary criteria included that the school was a public school and had a diverse student population.

Student Selection

Student participants were selected through criteria-based sampling (Merriam, 1998). Students selected to participate in the study needed to have an IEP that designated them as having LD and included goals in writing. Because the school system required parental permission before I knew the identity of students who had LD, the teacher initially chose students who met the criteria and sent permission slips home in order to receive parental permission for the student to participate in the study. After parental permission had been received, the teacher shared the identities of the students with me, the researcher, and recommended them for inclusion in the study. At this point, I approached the students to ask their assent to participate in the study. Three students, Ski, Bobby, and Roy, met the inclusion criteria, received parental permission, and assented to participate. In addition, two students considered by the teacher to be struggling writers but not identified as having LD were chosen to participate in the study through the same process. Including the two students who were struggling writers but did not have LD in the study was socially appropriate because they often sat in groups with the students who were included in the study. Although I collected data and circulated among all the students in the class, I only conducted interviews with these five students. Including the two students without LD helped assure privacy of the students with LD. Data for the students not identified as LD were coded separately during the

data collection process. These data were not used in the final analysis, as they did not address the research questions.

Researcher Role

The researcher is considered a primary instrument in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). In this study, sometimes I simply observed activities during class, but more often, I was an "observer as participant." Maxwell (2013) describes the participant role of the researcher as allowing the relationship with participants to become reciprocal, shaped by the interactions between participant and researcher. In addition, this relationship yields a deeper and more nuanced set of data, which will provide a better understanding of the context and thus increase the likelihood of answering the research questions (Maxwell, 2013).

Data Collection

In order to create a holistic description of the cases (Merriam, 1998), data were collected from a variety of sources. It is agreed among case study researchers that multiple sources of data are required to uncover the complexities of a case and to provide the researcher with valid and credible data (Yazan, 2015). Multiple sources of data reveal as much of the context, actions, and reasoning of the cases as possible and provide for "thick description" of the phenomena, (see Appendix A for a timeline of data collection).

Case study does not require any particular method of data collection. Rather, a careful consideration of the theoretical framework and research questions must be used in order to determine the type of data needed and appropriate methods of data collection

(Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2012). In the present study, qualitative data were collected in order to provide "insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 1998, p. 28–29). The theoretical framework indicates a need to understand the experiences and perceptions of the participants within the context of their instruction. Therefore, I looked for data that answered the "how" and "why" nature of the research questions.

Considering the previously discussed factors, I collected and analyzed three types of data—observations, interviews, and artifacts—to answer the questions in this research study.

Observations

Observations are used when the researcher has access to the natural field setting (Merriam, 1998). Advantages of deliberate careful observation include the fresh perspective that an outside observer may bring to the phenomena, an understanding of context or specific events that can be further discussed during interviews, support for findings gleaned during other methods of data collection, and knowledge of information that an interview participant may choose not to discuss or reveal (Merriam, 1998). Observations for this study included both direct observation and researcher as a participant observation (Merriam, 1998).

Students and teachers in the present study understood that I was in the classroom to observe and learn about student writing, but that at times, I would assist the students during instruction. Observing and participating in the classroom in this way for more than five months established me as a regular presence in the classroom, meliorating the

effects of my presence. Students were used to seeing me on a regular basis. During this time, I was careful to observe and interact with all students in the classroom not singling out research participants. Success with this effort was demonstrated clearly near the end of the study when several students who were not participants brought their work to me to observe and photograph.

The relationships I built with all the students helped to facilitate discussions during interviews with research participants. My roles in the classroom as observer and participant also helped me gain a deeper understanding of the assignments that students were working on, how they processed and acted on the instructions they were given, and their struggles with particular assignments as well as the nature of those struggles. Participation in the class also helped fulfill my goal of having a reciprocal relationship with the teacher and students, as I was able to assist the students and the teacher as appropriate. As an example, sometimes students needed technical assistance with software, and I was able to help quickly, allowing the students to continue their work rather than waiting until a teacher was able to help them. In addition, sometimes Mr. Martin (the teacher) would ask me for ideas about types of software to use for a particular purpose and I was able to help him find options that worked to meet his goals.

Use of a formal instrument or protocol increases the credibility of observations and focuses the collection of data on details that will address the research questions (Yin, 2012). The observation protocol developed for the present study is included in Appendix B. This protocol included space to describe teaching objectives, student activities (e.g., writing stories, note taking, reading aloud), teacher behaviors, and the classroom

configuration during each observation period. In addition, the observation protocol had space to describe specific behaviors of each student participant during different types of writing activities.

Interviews

Individual student interviews. Interviews are conversations with research participants that are designed to discover information that cannot be observed, such as thoughts, feelings, past events and individual interpretations (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Because each participant has unique experiences and perceptions within the classroom setting, individual interviews supply important data concerning individual perspective and help to construct how the individual views his or her own reality (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews include a mix of closed- and open-ended questions designed to allow each participant to bring to the interview areas of focus that the researcher may not have known to include (see Appendix C and D for student and teacher interview protocols respectively). Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to, as Weiss says, "learn about places we have not been and could not go and about settings in which we have not lived," (as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p. 103).

Students participated in two twenty-minute, individual, semi-structured interviews, one occurring near the beginning and the other near the end of the research period. Interview questions were developed and field tested during a pilot study conducted in the spring of 2018. The three pillars of the theoretical framework—current understandings about the nature of literacy, LD, and the concept of adolescence from youth cultural studies—were considered when developing questions for this study. The

first student interview was designed to increase rapport between the student and researcher, to explain the purpose of the research, to gain an initial understanding of the student's perspectives about writing, as well as his or her writing practices at school and at home. The second interview included questions similar to the first interview that were designed to indicate stability or instability in perspectives. Questions were also added based on initial themes that emerged during data analysis to serve as member checks. For example, early data analysis revealed that Roy preferred drawing to writing and felt that drawing enhanced his writing, so questions were added to his interview to confirm this finding. In addition, I asked specific questions about experiences during the semester using copies of the student's writing assignments to guide the discussion. Using this concrete representation of the student work helped the students recall experiences and provided more detailed explanations of their experiences and perceptions of the work.

Focus group interview. I conducted one focus group interview with four of the student participants in the middle of the study period. One student who was a participant in the study but whose data was not included in the analysis was not present. Focus groups are effective for stimulating thinking and promoting wide-ranging conversation (Morgan, 1995). They are especially helpful when participants have similar characteristic and are cooperative with each other, when time is limited, and when individual participants might be hesitant to share information (Creswell, 2013).

As students with LD sometimes struggle to communicate ideas orally and some adolescents in general struggle with self-awareness, these groups can help to bring to the surface ideas that may not be expressed in other formats (Tanis, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004).

In our group interview, this principle was demonstrated as one student, John, whose data was not included in the analysis, brought up many ideas and students either agreed or disagreed. Ski, a student who was usually reserved and polite in individual interviews, expressed strong opinions in the group environment. The second individual interview was then used to member check ideas that were expressed in the group interview, helping to reduce the possibility that participants might have changed their answers because of others around them.

Morgan (1995) suggests that interviewers prepare fewer questions for focus group interviews than for individual interviews and that these questions be designed to promote discussion giving participants a chance to fully answer the questions. The protocol, (see Appendix D), was designed with this in mind and refined based on the pilot study and upon initial data analysis from the first part of the current study. These changes included rewriting questions in such a way as to focus on group experiences rather than simply a repetition of interview questions. In addition, the protocol was adjusted to include instructions to students concerning privacy and confidentiality.

Teacher interviews. I interviewed the general education teacher at the beginning and the end of the study and the special education teacher at the end of the study. These interviews occurred before school or during teacher planning periods and took about 30 minutes each. Semi-structured questions were field tested during the pilot study in the same manner as student questions. The general education teacher questions in the first interview were designed to gain an understanding of overall teacher attitudes and teaching methods as well as his perspective of the needs of each student participant, their

current writing ability and attitudes and how he planned to provide further instruction for the students. The second general education teacher interview took place at the end of the research study. Questions were designed to gauge the teachers' understanding of what each student participant learned and how they experienced writing during the semester, as well as to member check by asking questions specific to initial themes that had been developed by this point. Because the same general education teacher took part in the pilot study, data from his interviews in that study were included in the findings of the current study.

The special education teacher was interviewed at the end of the research study. This interview had the same goals and questions as the general education teacher interview with more emphasis on types of support the student participants received or needed.

Artifacts

Artifacts are physical or online records that can be collected and analyzed by the researcher to provide a source of data that is natural to the context and not initiated by the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, artifacts could be considered the type of data most likely to provide the closest understanding of the truth within the context of the case.

Artifacts collected for the present study included copies or photographs of student writing and classwork, digital copies of student writing, photographs of classroom and school walls, online school information (i.e., school website, NC report cards), and photographs of student drawings. The collection of artifacts as a third source of data

helped me to gain and understanding of each student's writing ability and responses to different types of assignments. In addition, a sample of artifacts was used during the second interviews to stimulate conversation about student and teacher experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis

The study utilized constant comparative analysis, analyzing data on a regular basis throughout the study (Merriam, 1998). This analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the cases and to answer the research questions across large amounts of data (i.e., observations, interviews, and artifacts). The data analysis took place in three stages. Phase one occurred during data collection; phase two occurred within case analysis after all data were collected; and phase three, between case analyses was conducted after individual case analysis was completed.

Phase One

All interview data were transcribed, cleaned, read, and loaded into the data analysis software ATLASti as it was collected. As each piece of interview data was read, units of data were coded (Merriam, 1998).

Deductive coding of the first three interviews began with a list of expected codes generated for each research question based on the pilot study that was conducted in the spring. As each interview was coded, I added new codes when units of information did not fit into any of the established categories. After coding all three initial interviews, I used ATLASti features to collapse and sort codes by research question and into categories and subcategories under each research question.

When all codes were placed into a category, I wrote a coding scheme, defining each category, subcategory and code. I then discussed this coding scheme with my advisor and with a peer researcher to further define and redefine categories and codes. I worked with the peer researcher at this point to perform an inter-coder reliability check, using a process described in the following section. While this process served to strengthen reliability, it also helped to define categories and subcategories, thus increasing credibility. The process of defining categories and codes, collapsing, and redefining was repeated multiple times throughout the study.

I used field notes and artifacts collected throughout the project to generate new findings and in support of interview data. As these were collected, field notes and artifacts were copied into a digitized, dated journal for each student. In addition, I kept a daily class notes journal, describing the type of activities done in the classroom, relevant observations concerning the school or class atmosphere, and teacher actions and comments that were relevant to the study. I continued data collection and analysis until the data became saturated and categories and subcategories were clear and supported (Merriam, 1998).

Throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote analytical memos based on research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Each memo noted information from observations, artifacts, and interviews that helped to answer each research question. Analytical memos were shared with outside researchers (i.e., an advisor and a peer) in order to facilitate clarifying questions thus prompting my thinking from other perspectives (Merriam, 1998).

After the second interviews were conducted and data collection was complete, a new coding scheme, developed throughout the data collection process was defined. I repeated the inter-coder reliability process with the same outside researcher using the new coding scheme. The same process of individual coding, discussing, and clarifying results was followed.

Phase Two

After data collection and coding were complete, a synthesis of data was developed using a table for each case and research question with columns for each data type (i.e., codes from interviews, codes and comments from artifacts and observations, comments from teacher interview). Categories and codes were again reviewed and collapsed. From this synthesis, I wrote narratives answering the research questions for each case using data from artifacts, student interviews, and observations as well as considering the body of literature supporting the theoretical framework of this study. These narratives were shared with my advisor and discussed. From these discussions, I further analyzed the data, narrowing and strengthening findings.

Phase Three

The final phase of data analysis was across cases and was facilitated by building a matrix consisting of main research questions, constructed categories, and data from each case (Maxwell, 2013). I considered each research question by comparing and contrasting the cases within each category. After constructing a list of similarities and differences between each of the three cases, I wrote overall themes gleaned from each category. I

then consulted the body of literature from the theoretical framework as I considered what contribution each theme might make to the field.

Trustworthiness

Although qualitative research by nature is not known to be generalizable in the traditional sense, providing an abundance of information and conducting the study in a traceable and verifiable manner allows the research to be understood by the reader in the context in which it occurred (Creswell, 2013). Conducting a study in a highly ethical manner increases the credibility of the study, as ethics requires providing a clear understanding of researcher's bias and roles and a clear understanding of how the study was conducted, as well as a concern for the well-being and privacy of research participants (Merriam, 1998). Researcher reflexivity, providing rich description, member checking, triangulation, outside review, and providing an audit trail are effective ways to strengthen trustworthiness in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998; Tracy, 2010).

Ethics

Before this study began, approval was obtained from the Internal Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and from the school system where the study took place. All stipulations from these entities were carefully followed assuring that parent permission and participant consent and assent were collected, that participant anonymity was preserved, and that data were collected and stored appropriately to preserve anonymity. This included not discussing interview results with the classroom teacher or other students, making sure not to overtly focus specifically on research

participants during classroom observations, and never taking photographs of students or teachers.

In addition, I took special care to assure that my presence in the classroom and the school caused as little disruption as possible. I faithfully adhered to all school rules and limited my data collection to certain classroom and school events (e.g., not visiting during standardized testing windows or formal observations). In addition, I made certain to ask permission from students each time I photographed or viewed their writing, taking care not to "hover" or look over students' shoulders unless I was invited to do so and to follow the teacher's lead before circulating or helping students with assignments.

Furthermore, it was important that my presence in the classroom promoted reciprocity. I participated in ways that helped the classroom run smoothly, including helping students with technology issues, answering questions, reading work and giving input when it was appropriate to do so, and working with small groups. In addition, I helped in more mundane ways such as adjusting blinds, getting a book off a top shelf, taking up papers handed to me and using Google with my phone to find the meaning of an obscure word at the request of the teacher. Occasionally, the teacher would request my input for clarification during class discussions (e.g., Do you remember what year Kennedy was shot?), for suggestions on how to teach a certain topic, or for ideas about digital tools that could be used. When this happened, I made every effort to provide support as asked.

Researcher Reflexivity

All researchers have a level of bias; understanding this bias and how it may affect research decisions is important in any research (Stake, 1995). Researcher bias can be affected by a researcher's experiences, worldview, theoretical perspective, or orientation (Cresswell, 2013). Declaring this bias at the onset of a study allows the reader to understand the researcher's position. In addition, declaring the bias at the beginning of a research study and continuing to maintain a reflective stance throughout the study, aids the researcher in avoiding decisions solely based on his or her reflective bias (Merriam, 2009).

Towards this goal, I utilized journaling to alert me to any personal subjectivities or biases that surfaced during the study. I continually consulted my journal before writing analytical memos and before analyzing data and discussed its content with outside reviewers. Here I provide a researcher statement, written before the study began, which will provide the reader with an understanding of my position at the beginning of the study.

> I am a White, middle-class woman who is a fourth-year doctoral student in special education and I write for fun and serious purposes. I am also the parent and spouse of individuals with LD. I have been a general education teacher, special education teacher, home school educator, and tutor. In general, I believe that most instruction that students with LD receive at school is inadequate and does not take into account the academic potential of individual students or the divergent abilities of this group of people.
>
> As a former teacher, I understand the myriad of responsibilities that teachers have and feel strongly about the need for researchers to work closely with teachers when considering the best ways to teach students. I feel that teachers have the best understanding of what will and will not work in a classroom and that the

> context of the classroom and instruction cannot be understood without the cooperation and input of the teacher.

In addition, I met with a researcher and teacher who studies literacy for Black children early in the data collection process and again toward the end of data collection and discussed ways that race might play a role in this study. These conversations helped me to recognize how school structure, specifically the explicit rules and consequences concerning student clothing, movement, and conduct, might influence student attitudes and ultimately student expression through writing. As a result, I made sure to ask about these issues during the focus group interview to get student input. In addition, these conversations reminded me that my identity as a White female, as well as the fact that both teachers in the class were White, could affect circumstances in the classroom and the study.

Rich, Thick Description

Rich, thick description is used in case study to provide a complete description of the case (Merriam, 2009). The reader is given information from a variety of variables, which helps to gain a full understanding of the case and the context. For this study, I collected an abundance of data in several forms including artifacts (e.g., digital and traditional student writing, class assignments, pictures of classroom bulletin boards, online information about school and school policies, NC report cards), individual and group interviews, and observations that allow the reader to understand the context of the classroom (Merriam, 1998; Tracy, 2010). Descriptions include context of both the school and classroom environment. Detailed notes taken throughout the five-month data

collection period provide information about the interactions among students and teachers, and the types of activities that take place in the classroom. This abundance of data provides a rich description and deep understanding of the cases.

Member Checks

Member checking is a way to solicit feedback about research conclusions from the participants (Maxwell, 2013). During the second interview with the classroom teacher, I read initial themes from data analysis to him and asked for feedback. Through this process, the teacher was able to clarify his reasoning for certain professional actions and decisions as well as his perspectives of student and administration behavior

Member checks also occurred with the student participants but in a less obvious manner. During the second interview, I asked questions designed to confirm initial findings. For example, during Roy's second interview I reminded him that he and I had talked about his drawing and that he thought he was a visual person. I then asked if he thought drawing made his writing better, which was an initial finding that I had considered based on student artifacts. In this manner, I was able to check and confirm or clarify my initial findings from the student's perspective.

Triangulation

Triangulation of data is created using multiple sources of data to compare and contrast findings (Maxwell, 2013). When these data corroborate, they confirm findings, giving credibility to qualitative findings. In this study, data from artifacts, observations and interviews produced triangulation. Because there were multiple interviews and questions were designed in such a way as to confirm or elaborate on answers from other

questions, additional triangulation was achieved. As described in the data analysis section, a chart was used to assure that all data were synthesized and used both to generate and support themes that emerged from other data. This technique strengthens credibility by broadening the aspects of the case and allows the researcher to seek "rival explanations" from the data (Yin, 2012, p. 14).

Audit Trail

Providing an audit trail means that sufficient information is available so that the reader can understand the context of the cases, how the research was conducted and the data analyzed, and how conclusions were drawn (Merriam, 1998). In the current study, analytical memos written regularly during the period of data collection provided a road map to decision making throughout this phase of the research. Tables with data from each data source show how categories and themes are supported. Notes from discussions with outside reviewers show comments and changes made during the coding and theme production. Matrices show how each case was compared and contrasted during phase three of analysis to support final themes used to answer the research questions.

Outside Review and Inter-Rater Reliability

Throughout data collection and analysis, I met regularly with an advisor who is an expert in qualitative methods and an experienced researcher in teaching writing to review analytical memos and discuss the formation of categories and subcategories. I also met separately with a peer who has taken a doctoral level class in qualitative research and is familiar with the project. During these meetings, the outside researchers would ask clarifying questions or share alternative analysis for specific data. After discussion, these

new ideas were added to matrices and data was reread to support or contradict new findings.

The process of measuring inter-coder reliability and agreement improved the credibility of the findings as well as the process of coding throughout the study. Inter-coder reliability and agreement was measured for interview coding twice during of the individual participant analysis following a process developed for qualitative research by Campbell, Quincy, Osserman and Pederson (2013). This process helped to reveal ways that researcher bias was used in category construction and to indicate areas of data that were missed or needed reinterpretation. For example, when the rater and I disagreed on a code, we often decided that another code was needed or that the code was not in the correct category. In other instances, the discussion revealed that the meaning of a unit of data was different than what I understood about it while initially coding. In some instances, this prompted me to reread or re-listen to a portion of the interview to consider the meaning of a unit of data.

Once the coding scheme was developed, I worked with the peer reviewer to code an interview sample that was not part of a research project for training purposes. After training, a participant interview was randomly chosen to be coded independently by the intercoder and myself. After coding, I met with the peer reviewer to generate a percentage of intercoder reliability and to work through any disagreements to determine the appropriate coding. Initial inter-coder reliability was 69%. Through discussion we eventually agreed on all coding, which resulted in an intercoder agreement of 100% (Campbell et al., 2013). The new coding scheme was used for the second interviews

following the same process. The initial coding of the second interview resulted in an intercoder agreement of 81%. Again, all coding disagreements were discussed and resolved, resulting in an intercoder agreement of 100%.

As a result of the inter-coding process, the coding scheme was further clarified throughout the analysis process.

A similar process verified coding of documents. I developed an initial classification process for each student assignment and discussed this process with an outside reviewer competent in qualitative research. After discussion, we reviewed all the assignments gathered for one student and agreed upon the categorization of each assignment. I then used the same process to code assignments for the rest of the students who had the same type of assignments as the initial student. Assignments were coded based on whether or not they were complete, if they were responses to reading, included choice of topics, or whether they allowed students to express opinions or ideas.

Limitations

The nature of qualitative research is that it is a subjective enterprise (Stake, 1995). Additionally, with few exceptions (e.g., the collection of certain artifacts), the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Merriam, 1998). Given this inherent limitation of design and the fact, as described prior, that I was often a participant in the classroom during observation, it is certain that some events were affected by my presence and participation. Rather than try to eliminate this likelihood, I used a detailed observation protocol and recorded how I participated in each event. If the data showed

that my participation was likely to have affected the events, it was noted in the discussion.

Another limitation may be the cultural and gender differences between the research participants and myself. I am a White, middle-class woman and all the student participants are Black, middle school boys. This difference in ethnicity and my status as a classroom "visitor" could have affected the students' willingness to confide in me during interviews. Indeed, once during an interview, I asked a Black, male student about an instance that he had written about when he felt like he was discriminated against because he was different. While confirming that this had happened, the student chose not to share more because it was "personal." It could be that because I was White, he thought that I would not understand the situation. Additionally, although I believe the length of time spent in the classroom helped students become more comfortable with my presence, he could have still viewed me as an outsider and, therefore, was not comfortable sharing such personal information. As discussed earlier, spending considerable amounts of time in the classroom, taking time to assist students with their work, and carefully designing research questions to build rapport helped to increase the level of comfort that the students felt around me; however, these instances did take place. In addition, the group interview gave students an opportunity to be in the majority while sharing with me, the minority, about their writing experiences. This positively allowed students to be more verbal and to bring up ideas that were not discussed in individual interviews. Similarly, because I was the primary researcher and conducted the analysis, it is likely that my "lens" as a White, middle-class woman affects the results. As described in the section on

trustworthiness, continually checking my biases through journaling and consulting with other researches helped to limit the bias caused by this limitation.

A third limitation that should be noted is a lack of resources to triangulate student information about home writing and social media use. This information was learned through student interviews, and with the exception of some examples of homework, there was not verification of home writing. While second interviews were utilized to confirm answers given during the first interviews about home writing practices, once again the authenticity depended on the student as a resource. Parent interviews, home observations and samples of social media use would have strengthened this part of the study.

Finally, the school administration placed additional limitations on the study. School system policies did not allow access to school records or interference with regular classroom instruction; therefore, my understanding that these students who had an IEP that identified them as having a LD and contained goals in writing was thoroughly dependent on the word of the teachers. In addition, all interviews were required to take place outside of regular class time, such as lunch, and limited the time for interviews. However, carefully preparing for the second interviews as well as the group interview allowed better use for the time allotted to ask questions that were needed in order to gain an understanding of student perspectives and experiences.

In this chapter, I have described how this multiple case study was designed and conducted. I included detailed information about each phase of the study to promote the replicability of the study. During this chapter, I placed emphasis on the elements of the study designed to promote trustworthiness. The inclusion of researcher reflexivity, rich

description, member checking, triangulation, outside review, and an audit trail strengthen trustworthiness and bring credence to the findings, which are discussed in the following chapters (Merriam, 1998; Tracy, 2010).

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN-CASE ANALYSIS: GEORGE, RINGO, AND PAUL

This purpose of this study is to better understand the way middle school students with learning disabilities (LD) experience and perceive writing and to highlight the voices of students with LD. In this chapter, I describe the three student cases in regard to each of the research questions using information gleaned from the data. Because only those who actually experience a phenomenon can fully understand it, I use the written and oral words of the students in this study as much as possible to illuminate each individual story (Mertens, 2007).

It is important to provide a detailed description of the school and to understand how the three student cases experience writing in the real context of their lives. While the observations took place in the students' language arts classroom, the students brought with them perspectives and attitudes about learning shaped by the overall school environment as well as their own personal experiences. Because each student has unique experiences, understanding the greater context of the setting is important as the reader considers the findings for each individual (Yin, 2012).

I begin with a brief description of the community and then describe the school at which the study took place, the language arts classroom, and the types of activities that take place in the classroom. This information includes physical descriptions, notes about the general atmosphere in the school, as well as information gleaned about the

students who attend the school. I also describe each of the classroom teachers, their roles in the classroom, and their general perspectives about teaching these students. Lastly, I describe my role as a participant researcher for one semester in the classroom.

Once the context is set, I specifically describe the findings of each research questions for each of the three student participants. Using artifacts, field notes, and interview data, I share with the reader the writing lives of each of the students and initial themes that come from the data.

Context of the Study

Abbey Road Middle School

Abbey Road Middle School is located in a residential area near a busy shopping center in a large urban county in the southeastern United States. It is a public magnet school focusing on arts and leadership for students in sixth to eighth grades. Students who live in the district may choose to attend this school while students outside of the district can apply to attend through a lottery. The school is small compared to others in the district, with less than 400 students.

The student body is split almost equally between Black and Hispanic students with a small percentage of White students. The school is a CEP (Community Eligibility Provision) school, a designation for schools in high poverty areas. All students in this school are eligible to receive free lunch and breakfast.

The brick building, built in 1935, originally served as a high school. The front of the school faces a sloping lawn of green grass and displays its name in large block letters. There are several very large Oak trees on the campus by gravely lawns with

chain-link fences enclosing what appear to be air conditioners and heat pumps, an assortment of pipes, and machinery. One area that is simply unmowed grass is surrounded completely by chain-link fencing. The school itself is not fenced. In December of 2018, toward the end of the observation period for this study, a security system was implemented; the door to the school now remains locked and visitors must push a button and ask to enter. All visitors must enter through this door, which is next to the school office.

The school is adjacent to an elementary school, which shares the same principal as the middle school. Visitors enter the building directly into a large atrium. The office is next to this door and visitors sign in and get a visitor's nametag to wear during their visit. Paintings of the school mascot and large posters advertising the school's arts program decorate the hallways. The school's motto and pride statements, part of the school's MTSS (Multi-tiered Systems of Support) program are also found on the walls. For example, a poster states:

I will take personal responsibility for my choices and actions;
be respectful to everyone,
live each day with integrity,
be dependable at school and at home;
always remember that everybody counts.

The stairways have white paper signs taped to the door with grade levels listed. Each classroom door has a sign telling what book the teacher is currently reading. Office staff have similar signs posted at their desks.

On the state report card, the school received an overall rating of F for both mathematics and reading in 2016-2017 due to low scores on standardized tests. Efforts have been made to increase student standardized test scores and improve student behavior. The MTSS program, which the school is transitioning to from a PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support) program, includes highly scripted behavior for the students to follow including a dress code, specific rules about how to walk and behave in the hallways, and constantly monitored activities. Rewards for good behavior include positive visits to the principal's office and special school money that can be used at the school store to buy items such as balls, soft drinks, gum, and snacks.

The school has a strict "no cell phone" policy that is in its second year. Mr. Martin, the general education teacher in this study, said that this policy "is one of the better decisions that this administration has made." He said that the policy was implemented mainly for student safety. Before the ban, it was said that students would use cell phones as a way to plan rendezvous during school, which may have resulted in violence (e.g., fights, arguments). As a result of the policy, however, teachers cannot plan activities involving students using their phones as a part of class time. Classroom sets of laptop computers or the computer lab must be utilized in order to gain access to digital tools.

A variety of programs have been adopted by the school and district and mandated for classroom use in an effort to increase student test scores. These include the use of I-ready software to diagnose and improve student reading, the American Reading Company (ARC) program which uses leveled readers and individual reading conferences

to improve reading scores, and the ACE (Answer-Cite-Explain) writing program which was in the process of being implemented during the research study. Teachers are expected to use standards-based teaching (e.g. every lesson is based on a standard which is documented in lesson plans and displayed in the classroom) and keep students on task 100% of the time. Assistant principals make regular classroom checks to monitor for On-task behavior, dress code violations, and to assure that instructional standards and Essential Questions (EQ's) are posted.

This effort to provide oversight was obvious on the day before Thanksgiving break. Two assistant principals came into the classroom each at different times to monitor during the 90-minute class period when I was observing. One student was removed from class after one of these visits because of a dress code violation. Mr. Martin told me that the principal had used the all school intercom to lecture the students about behavior earlier that morning. I was familiar with this type of "intercom" lecture as it occurred while I as in the building on another day. He felt that the lecture along with the overt monitoring was making the students anxious.

Mr. Martin described the goal of the administration rather vividly during an interview when I asked him about the monitoring by assistant principals. In his opinion, it was all about trying to raise test scores.

> They can say whatever they want about educating the whole child and creating a positive, you know, contributing member of society. That is wonderful philosophically, but they are not going to give a two craps if I am creating a whole child if our scores are still red.

The highly prescriptive controlled environment described here is considered by Lesko (2012) as a reaction to a society that considers adolescents to be deviant and in need of control. The cell phone ban is typical of many schools that think of social media and networking opportunities afforded by cell phones as distractions rather than educational tools (boyd, 2014). It is also typical that schools with a high percentage of students of color are more likely to have rules constricting student movement and digital technology than schools that are more racially balanced (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). Banning the use of digital technology along with constrictive rules concerning student movement and dress shifts power from students to teachers and administrators. That students and teachers alike are monitored to make sure they are staying on task may indicate an administration that is focused on delivering a prescribed curriculum to meet a set goal rather than considering the viewpoints of students or even that of teachers.

Within the school environment, the classroom exists with its own culture and characteristics. Next I describe the classroom in which the study occurred.

Language Arts Classroom

The physical space. The study took place inside Mr. Martin's language arts classroom on the ground floor, directly across from the auditorium and the resource officer's office. This office appears to be staffed fulltime by a police officer dressed in full uniform, including weapons. An adjoining door connects this classroom to a mathematics classroom, to which many students go after they leave the language arts class. These are the only two classrooms on this hallway.

Mr. Martin's classroom has a long row of tall windows covered with blinds. In the morning, the sun shines through the windows on student desks, resulting in the blinds being closed most of the time. Lights are generally kept off in the classroom, as students need to read information from the projector.

In the front of the classroom, a white board generally displays the class agenda, the standards for the week, the EQs and other pertinent information. Assignment information, reading pieces, and sometimes digital bulletin board responses are shown on large flat screen in the front of the classroom. At the front right of the classroom, Mr. Martin often stands at a computer desk directly in front of the students while modeling a reading annotation or a writing sample that is projected on the large screen.

A large table across the front left of the classroom is generally cluttered with student work, papers to be passed out and reading materials. The back wall of the classroom is filled with bookshelves that hold a mixture of teacher and student books, including a row of dictionaries on a top shelf that is too high for most students, and this researcher, to reach. A varied collection of items, including a large wooden rhinoceros and numerous potted plants, are on these shelves. A table in the back of the classroom holds a number of colored baskets with books sorted by ARC reading levels.

Student desks with storage in the bottom and a slanted working surface on top are pushed together in groups of three or four throughout the classroom. Also, in the room are numerous filing cabinets and a large cabinet with "cubbies" in which each student stores personal items, most often books from the library. Bulletin boards in the classroom include a word wall and a board displaying exceptional student work; I never

saw any work belonging to the research participants displayed on this board during my time in the classroom. There were also various posters that go along with the school's MTSS program posted around the room.

Students. The class observed during the study is an 8th grade language arts inclusion class. There are 18 students in the class, six of which have IEPs (Individual Education Plans). This means that these students are eligible for special education and have IEPs with goals that address reading and/or writing, while other students come from the general population and do not have IEPs. Three of these students have LD diagnoses and IEP goals for writing. According to Mr. Martin, the students who do not have IEPs are assigned to the class based on scheduling needs and represent a wide variety of skill levels. However, due to scheduling, none of the students in this class are in Math 1, which is a high school level mathematics class. Although being in a high-level mathematics class does not indicate reading or writing skill, this scheduling does have the potential to eliminate students who have high skills in both mathematics and language arts from being in this class. Thereby it follows that the scheduling issue could preclude the possibility of this classroom being fully inclusive, containing students that are representative of the school population.

Unfortunately, according to Mr. Martin, there is a degree of stigma that goes along with being in the inclusion class. He stated,

> You know most of these IEPs were birthed in elementary school. There are very few IEPs that are generated in middle school. That is just the reality of it. So a lot of them have had this since third or fourth grade, and they realize this, and that there is a little bit of stigma there. And they have never known a non-inclusion class. So, they are always traveling with the EC [Exceptional Child] kids.

Thus, although the intended purpose of the inclusion classroom was to educate students in the general population, Mr. Martin believed that the students in the inclusion class were somewhat isolated from higher-level students. These students moved from class to class with the same group of students who carry the EC label. As a matter of fact, Mr. Martin said that overall students in the inclusion class are less engaged and struggle more with basic skills than students in his other classes. He described some of the students as being on 9th grade level or higher while many of the EC students score in the K-2 level and that this makes it difficult for him to select novels and other reading materials that both challenge and are at instructional level for all of his students

The general education teacher. Mr. Martin has been teaching for four years. He entered teaching as a lateral entry teacher after years in the food service industry. He describes his family as an "educational family:" his mother is a school administrator, his father a guidance counselor, and his brother is a teacher. He said he always knew he would go into teaching but went in a different direction in college and was "stuck" in the food service industry because it is "such a great industry." He continues to work as a waiter two nights a week. Mr. Martin is currently taking master's level courses to work toward his teaching certificate.

Mr. Martin seems to be liked by the students and staff. In December of this year, his colleagues at the school voted him Teacher of the Year. The school secretary, guidance counselor, and librarian all remarked to me at some point during the study about what a good teacher Mr. Martin is. Students in the pilot study, as well as this study, said

that they liked how Mr. Martin helped them, how they were more relaxed in his class, or how they considered him a friend.

Mr. Martin has taken leadership positions in the school and is a soccer coach, the grade level chair, PBIS committee chair, and sits on the tech committee. He supports first-year teachers, provides behavioral management training for first-year teachers, and sees students for behavior management support during his planning time and after school. One of the mornings I interviewed him, Mr. Martin told me he had spent twenty minutes in the office getting ready to roll out the new SMOD policy in the afternoon's staff meeting. I asked why he had so many different positions, wondering if there were incentives such as extra stipends for his work.

> I coach three days a week. There's a little stipend, which I think is 40 bucks a month. There's no incentive for doing the chairing of the committees… I just kind of do it because I was asked, and I do feel a certain sense of, you know, this is something that should happen and needs to happen. And obviously if they want me to do it, there's a reason.

Mr. Martin seems to have submersed himself into the work of the school and his willingness to agree to participate has been welcomed. In spite of his activities within the school community, Mr. Martin was focused on teaching during class times and was prepared with lesson plans and handouts. With the exception of occasionally stapling papers and redoing seating charts, I never saw him engaging in any type of paperwork or non-instructional activities during class. Most of his time in class was spent directly teaching the whole class—reading aloud, leading discussions, modeling annotations, or working individually with students. Often when students were working on a digital

bulletin board assignment, Mr. Martin would type his own answer into the computer while projecting it on the screen in the front of the classroom and then reply to students as they submitted their answers.

Mr. Martin's classroom management style reflected his view of the students in his classroom. He explained to me that sometimes he has to accept "less than ideal" behavior from students, and in general, this understanding has resulted in few significant discipline problems in his class. For example, describing one of the students from the pilot study, who often was not engaged in the classroom, he said:

> I settle for passive compliance from him…you know…that is where I kinda look over the fact that he has a computer out and he is kind of doing his thing with the computer, because you know the instruction for the 90 percent is preserved… Because they say 100 percent of kids, 100 percent engagement and that is fine, but really given the reality of what we have to deal with on a daily basis with some of our high fliers, with some of our quote, unquote tier three kids…you know trying to preserve instruction for the 90 percent who are engaged and are here to learn is problematic.

In this case, Mr. Martin allowed the student to be off task at times as he felt that to confront the student would be too disruptive to the whole learning environment. In spite of this statement, observations showed that Mr. Martin generally held students to a high standard of engagement and often kept students working until just seconds before time to move to the next class. As students left the classroom, he often reminded them of school rules: "zero level [referring to voice level], stay to the right, shirts tucked in, stay to the right, shirts tucked in." As a new class came, he would greet them outside the door, handing out bell work sheets. Classroom management included assigning seats and sometime making students sit in the assigned seats, occasionally walking through the

classroom and waking students, reminding students to be a level 1 or 2 referring to voice level, passing out coupons for the school store, and making notes about behavior during reading time. Sometimes he would gently guide a student by the shoulder toward his desk or intercept a student that was moving away from the appropriate direction in the hallway. Other times, he gives short, clear commands such as "Bobby, sit." Only once in the entire study did I hear him raise his voice; he ordered a student into the hallway, "Right now, in the hallway, or I am making a phone call." After that incident, Mr. Martin sat on the floor in the doorway for several minutes talking to the student before they came back into the classroom.

Often Mr. Martin would stand on a chair, at the beginning of an activity, and explain what is going to happen that day along with expectations. "You have 15 functional minutes - I appreciate your calm demeanor and your hard work. I want something completed by the end of class." Sometimes students were included in the decision making, "How are you feeling, do you want to keep reading or get to work?" Most of the time, he allowed students to talk quietly to each other. Sometimes, he would make incredibly honest pleas for student cooperation, "You guys are giving me a headache. You guys need to help me out; I got way too much going on in here. We are going to have to go to all zeroes." Often, he would end class with a statement such as "Remember, I love you guys…mostly."

Special education teacher. Because the class was an inclusion class, a special education teacher, Mrs. Rigby, came to the classroom for about half of the class period. This was Mrs. Rigby's first year teaching at this school and she said that inclusion is a

new experience for her, and she is learning more about how to teach this way. She works with five other classes, each for about 40 minutes a day and because of the number of students, she did not feel like she knows each student well. Her focus is on the students who have IEPs and works on their IEP goals while she was in the classroom. She described the students as having sub-par writing skills. She blamed this problem on lack of writing instruction in elementary school. She also mentioned that the students do not like to write. Generally, Mrs. Rigby walked around the classroom, monitoring, and sometimes sitting with students to assist them individually. As I describe later in the dissertation, students were not sure exactly what Mrs. Rigby's role in the classroom was, but they knew that they could get help from her.

Although she had access to lesson plans, she was not involved in planning and usually did not know what was happening in the class until she got there. Both Mr. Martin and Mrs. Rigby explained that because they did not have a common planning time, they were not able to co-plan. Mr. Martin was responsible for all the lesson plans, and Mrs. Rigby spent her time in the class assisting the six students that had IEPs, as well as the other students. Mr. Martin said he knows that this is not how an inclusion class is supposed to work

> **Mr. Martin:** Yeah, we don't have common planning, you know, we don't - right. And that's one of the things that, that …I went through this training last spring…. And it was the biggest crock of hooey that I have ever been through. Because the EC, the woman who was running the training, said that you know, what we're supposed to be doing is you're supposed to walk into a co-taught classroom and not know who is the teacher, not know who's the classroom and who is the EC teacher, It's supposed to be this symphonic flow, where they can interchangeably finish each other sentences and harmonize and oscillate around the room, and you

shouldn't even be able to tell that it is an EC room. I am just like come on, man. I am sorry.

April: And you don't have common planning, is that right?

Mr. Martin: We don't…no. That was one of the things that was brought up. She said, Well, if you really want to do it, you'll make a way to do it. Okay, right lady.

Mr. Martin's dilemma is well documented in the research literature. One of the most often cited problems with co-teaching in inclusion classrooms is lack of administrative support and lack of common planning time (Scruggs et al., 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). In this case, the co-teachers did not have co-planning time and the administration seemed to be putting the responsibility to co-teach and co-plan completely on the teachers rather than providing the support needed. As a result, the co-teaching model used most often in this classroom is "one teach-one assist" described as the most ineffective model by Friend and colleagues (2010).

Student reading and writing. Specifically with regard to literacy, Mr. Martin said that the class observed in the study had the "lowest level of engagement" of all of his classes. For example, when discussing the class response to reading *The Giver*, by Lois Lowery, he said, " I wish there was more engagement, I wish there was a little bit more energy for it." He went on to explain that another class is much further along in the book because they really want to read it, whereas this class is less enthusiastic.

Mr. Martin explained that he tries to teach the class using the state-based standards that he is required to use but struggles because many of the students, not just the EC, do not have basic skills. He explained,

> But, I'm struggling with how do I reconcile what I'm supposed to be teaching on paper with, you know what the kids are realistically and functionally capable of? Right, I understand that I'm supposed to meet them in the middle, I get that. But, you know, teaching dramatic irony seems kind of abstract to me when the capability isn't there to read a brief paragraph on a third or fourth grade level and give me a one-sentence summary or two-sentence summary…Yeah, it's like bridging that chasm is difficult. I got all my, you know, that's where I struggle… And I understand it - differentiation, scaffolding, and all that good stuff. I get that in theory, but in practice, I don't know how to best do that.

Mr. Martin went on to explain that he tried to present higher level texts to students in a guided reading format, taking time to slowly discuss and answer questions. He used *Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin as an example, saying that it was on a higher reading level than most of his students could handle but that he wanted to expose them to something with "a lot of layers." Thus, he used the whole class guided reading format, modeling annotations as he went. In this way he exposed students to a large spectrum of reading materials including videos, poems, articles, informational texts, songs, and books, some at a higher level than they would be able to read on their own fruition.

Mr. Martin's lack of confidence when it came to teaching literacy to students with disabilities is common for both special and general education teachers (Troia & Graham, 2017). Teachers say they do not know how to teach students with disabilities and that they have had little training to do so. Ironically, just after talking about the frustration he feels, he listed the techniques that he knows are supposed to be used to help struggling students and then described using one of those techniques, scaffolding, that he used to present a challenging piece of literature to the students.

Teaching writing. When I asked about teaching writing, Mr. Martin talked about the tension between focusing on standards and giving students a chance to express themselves. He said,

> To be perfectly honest, I think, a lot of times a lot of these guys just want someone to listen and to tell their story. And I think a lot of what happens in public instruction is an absolute disconnect between not just an absolute lack of a voice from students, that is all about getting these test scores and studying standards. And I understand that, but a lot of times all they want is to talk and write or not necessarily write - they want to express themselves and someone to listen.

Mr. Martin understood that students needed to express themselves. One way that he allowed for this kind of self-expression was through short narrative writing activities. Every class began with "bell work," which is a writing prompt that students can choose to write about or they can choose to "free write." Mr. Martin explained part of his purpose for the bell work:

> That goes a long way. I think in terms of getting them to express…without talking about mechanics or talking about structure or specifics and always telling them it doesn't have to be grammatically correct, I don't care about that when they are doing free writes.

During the interview, I asked Mr. Martin about assignments or worksheets that often state the number of complete sentences that students are required to write. In some cases, I wondered why students were being asked to write in complete sentences when the activity seemed to be about gathering information or forming thoughts, rather than writing a full paragraph. He explained, "If I don't make that explicitly clear, I'll get just a couple of disjointed phrases at best, okay, and maybe just some random words." He then

went on to say that, although he often made this requirement, students often did not comply. He felt like many of the students in the class did not know how to define a complete sentence.

Here again, Mr. Martin expressed concern about the low skill level of his students and his own low expectations. He stated the requirement of "two sentences" hoping that this would result in students writing more than just a few words, but then indicated that he did not know if students knew what a sentence was.

Emphasizing the structure and mechanics of writing is common for teachers of students with LD and other disabilities and this can result in students being overly focused on the mechanical part of writing, therefore, producing small amounts of incoherent texts (Graham & Hall, 2016; Troia & Maddox, 2004). Mr. Martin's two-sentence requirement and focus on structure was contrasted by his attitude about narrative writing prompts. In these cases, Mr. Martin said he did not grade for grammar and structure and talked about the importance of students being able to express themselves.

Mr. Martin utilizes a variety of digital tools, accessed by students through school laptops. The tools include word processing software, computer-based graphic organizers, digital bulletin boards, storyboards, and Internet search engines. Mr. Martin began using these tools at a high frequency during the year before the study, after taking a master's level course focusing on using digital technology to teach writing. I was also a student in that class, which is where I learned of Mr. Martin's interest in using digital tools to teach writing. Before taking the course, he said that he used little technology in the classroom because he did not know how to use it to teach standards or why it was important.

However, after taking the course, he began to use digital technology more in the classroom to the point where it became almost a daily activity. He explained,

> I found those [digital tools] to be an effective alternative to doing a pencil paper response, for sure. There are components to digital learning that I think are massively beneficial to many kids. You know there are certain issues to it too that arise here and there. I think overall that the kids want to be immersed in a digital sort of environment.

When Mr. Martin mentioned "certain issues," he was referring to students who would browse gaming or sporting sights instead of staying engaged with the assignment. In addition, he had experienced problems with students using inappropriate language on the discussion board. When this event occurred, Mr. Martin had taken away the computers and given everyone a traditional writing assignment. Mr. Martin felt that in spite of these issues, using technology was beneficial. He went on to give an example of a project done the previous year and how the publishing aspect of digital technology could be helpful for students:

> When we read *The Giver,* we did a storyboard project, which was much more specifically tuned. There were a couple different components. Like instances of dramatic irony when we know something that the readers know that the characters don't know. Ok, express that, give me a direct quote with evidence from the text underneath, represent that scene visually. In that capacity, that project was much longer…spent about three or four class periods on it…much more standards based… I think there is utility in having them see it, having them make it into something that is tangible, visible, something that they could post on their Facebook page if they wanted to…which is cool.

Here Mr. Martin expressed his understanding of the value of combining writing with visuals and alluded to the connections students could make between what they did at school and their own personal space online.

Mr. Martin also described the negative aspects of using the laptops, mainly that some students would browse sporting or game pages rather than working on the assignments, and that he could not monitor all the website use. Also, at the beginning of the school study, Mr. Martin was often not able to use his classroom set of laptops as the mathematics teacher next door was using them. Sometimes, when he did have access to the laptops, he would pass them out only to find that the Internet at the school was not working that day. Other times he would have students log on to particular websites to find that they had been blocked by the school administration. In this case, he would often have to make last minute alternate plans. In spite of these trouble spots, he said that in general, he felt that there was more engagement when using laptops than when not, and that he used them almost on a daily basis when possible.

Researcher as participant. Students knew that I was a researcher and that I was there to learn about how students write. Because I attended the class almost every day, they became accustomed to my presence and expected me to be there daily. Sometimes during lessons, Mr. Martin would ask my opinion about subjects that came up or if I knew information that he might not about a certain topic. Once he asked me to look up the meaning of a word and I was able to demonstrate how easy this was to do on my phone. Students used this opportunity to complain that they were not allowed to use phones at school, but Mr. Martin reminded them that they could use them when doing

homework. Two other times I was asked to participate in a type of co-teaching where I worked with one group while he worked with another and then groups were switched. This happened when the EC teacher was not in the classroom, and I never observed this type of teaching happen with the EC teacher. Often Mr. Martin would ask me to help students with writing or with technology. I would move around the classroom, answering questions, encouraging students, and observing their work. I tried to work with all the students, not just the research participants.

At first students, while polite, generally did not ask me questions and some said that they preferred to wait for Mr. Martin to help them. By the end of the study, however, students would ask for my opinion on an issue or what they should write about, ask for help, and sometimes show me their writing and ask if I would like to take pictures of it for my research. This signified that by my regular presence and by circulating among everyone, I had become an accepted member of the classroom and was understood to be a researcher but not necessarily specifically for the students involved.

These previous sections have described the environment in which the participants were situated as I studied their writing experiences. Within that context, the types of writing assignments and activities that took place in the classroom, greatly affected the student writing experiences. In the following section, I describe the types of learning activities that took place in the classroom.

Classroom Activities

District and school-wide policies dictated many of the activities that took place in the classroom. For example, the following is a list of activities that Mr. Martin said were required of him to complete in the 90-minute period he had with each class:

- Standards-based teaching – Based on NC Standard course of study, each class period is linked to an Essential Question (EQ);
- I-Ready – A computerized diagnostic and learning tool – 45 minutes weekly;
- ARC – American Reading Company – 20 minutes per day. Students are leveled and read from books in their level; teachers conference with students about books;
- Informational texts – Two times per week, students read informational texts and answer multiple choice and short answer questions similar to those found on standardized tests; and
- ACES – Answer, Cite, Explain, Summarize, a scripted writing program designed to teach paragraph writing.

A typical classroom schedule began with students being handed "bell work" as they entered the room, which is a half sheet of paper with a writing prompt. They may write about the prompt or a topic of their choice and are supposed to keep their pencil moving for five minutes. The purpose of this assignment is to make sure that the students write every day, to practice and achieve more writing fluency, and to begin exploration of ideas that students may find in their reading. In addition, as described by Mr. Martin earlier, he hopes that this time gives students the freedom to write about their lives and

share ideas with him. Some of examples of writing prompts from the “bell work” include:

- Do you think music is a kind of poetry? Why or why not? What is similar about poetry and music and what is different?
- In *Story of an Hour* what is one thing that the reader knows (that YOU know) that characters in the text do not know? How does the ending of the story make you feel?
- Why do you think it is important to understand why someone would write a text?
- How do you feel about standardized testing? What is your first reaction when you know that you will be taking a benchmark or an EOG?

As soon as the students finish their “bell work,” they are supposed to begin self-selected reading. They choose a book to read either from one of the bins of books in the classroom or one they brought from home or the school library. Students receive grades based on whether or not they are reading during the "checks" Mr. Martin conducts. Occasionally Mr. Martin reviews the requirements with students, emphasizing that they are to be a zero level (no talking), no drawing, and no sleeping. Generally, at the end of the reading time, he may say something like, "Great job for most of you during reading. Everybody got a pass except one or two people."

Often, after the self-selected reading time, Mr. Martin stands on a chair and announces what is going to happen next, introducing with "This is what is happening" or "This is what I want you to do." On a typical day, students spend 10–20 minutes reading as a whole class. Most often, this involves guided reading of a novel the class is reading

or an informational text. When students read an informational text, each student makes notes on his or her own copy of the text, while Mr. Martin makes notes on his copy displayed on the projector. If students are not annotating, they are asked to follow along in their reading with a pencil, a notecard, or their finger. This is an attempt to make sure students are on task at all times. During the reading, Mr. Martin might alternate between reading himself and calling on students to read. This is another way to hold students accountable, as they are supposed to know exactly where in the text to begin reading when their name is called. Occasionally, Mr. Martin stops reading, asks questions about the meaning of a word or a part of the text, and makes notes on the paper, which is projected, for all students to see.

After guided reading, there is usually an independent response time. Often this involves answering a few multiple-choice questions and then some kind of writing activity designed to access the students' understanding of his or her reading. Sometimes, but rarely, the writing during this time involves a separate activity not connected to the reading. In addition, students may complete vocabulary homework, fill out reading logs, and do I-Ready activities.

Table 4.1 shows a typical class schedule and Table 4.2 provides examples of typical writing assignments. A careful look at the table as well as the description of activities shows an overall emphasis in the classroom on reading and that most writing assignments are responses to reading. Furthermore, most of the reading and writing instruction is influenced by explicit standardized writing or reading programs in which the teacher has minimum latitude to tailor experiences to students' needs. Therefore,

writing instruction is tied explicitly to reading instruction, which consists largely of whole group guided reading. Whereas this type of explicit instruction is common for students in inclusion classes, time for individualized instruction or student support, a necessary element for student success in inclusion classes, is not always provided (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Wexler et al., 2018).

Table 4.1 Typical Classroom Schedule

Time Allowed	**Activity**
10 Minutes	Writing response to a prompt or free write.
20 Minutes	Self-selected reading (students select books, read, fill out reading journal when finished).
20 Minutes	Whole class guided reading – usually reading together with teacher modeling annotation of reading a short informational text or reading a book chapter together with students following along.
5–10 minutes (but often took research participants longer)	Independent response to the reading – mixture of multiple choice and open-ended questions generally designed to prepare students for EOG testing.
20–30 minutes	Writing activity or response to reading (e.g., double journal, ACES response, digital bulletin board response, narrative writing).

In the previous section, I described the community, school, and classroom where this study takes place. While the focus of this study is on the writing lives of the three research participants, it is important to note that certain structural and systemic problems exist at Abbey Road Middle School. First, the school's status as a high minority, low socio-economic school is indicative of many schools in the region, where historical and

societal issues have created pockets of segregation. This is true, in spite of recognition that schools with this make up generally do not serve students as well as schools that are balanced in terms of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Table 4.2 Typical Classroom Writing Assignments

Weekly Interactive Language Acquisition Activity Framework packet (Vocabulary): There is a creative writing opportunity at the end of this packet, which the three student participants generally did not complete.
Pre-Reading Assignments: Prediction, Discussion, Group work, Web Quests (often these pre-reading assignments involved a discussion and individual responses on a worksheet).
Narrative Writing Assignment: Google Docs (This was a one-time assignment that took several days). Students were allowed to choose an event in their life that was important to them as a topic. Mr. Martin asked me to take an active part in supporting students, specifically assigning me as the helper for the three research participants. During the classroom time set aside for this project, I helped students choose topics, read the student work, asked clarifying questions, gave suggestions when they asked, and generally supported the process of writing.
Response to Reading: • Reading informational texts and responding to multiple choice and open-ended short answer questions • Electronic Discussion Board responses • Digital Graphic Organizers – Popplet and Lucid Charts • Assignments on Google slides – less common • Story Boarding - less common
ACES (Answer, Cog, Explain, Summarize) - A structured writing activity designed to scaffold the process of writing a paragraph. Sometimes this was also a response to reading activity.

The lack of common planning time for the special and general education teachers could indicate a lack of resources or a lack of administrative support for or understanding

of the importance of teacher cohesion in the inclusion classroom. Often schools that lack effective infrastructure and resources do not provide the appropriate types of teacher support, including professional development and times for teacher collaboration that are needed for effective inclusion programs (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Because of the lack of common planning time and the fact that Mrs. Rigby served mainly as an assistant or student monitor means that students with disabilities may not be getting the support mandated by their IEPs.

An emphasis on standardized test scores, the over focus on student management, the lack of digital resources, and teachers who do not have proper credentials and training are all conditions that could limit student learning at this school. While this study did not directly confront these issues, an understanding that this is the context in which the three study participants receive their education is important as we consider their stories.

Within the context of the school and classroom, it is important to remember that writing is affected by personal, social, and cultural contexts that the students bring with them into a writing space (Haddix, 2009; Muhammad, 2012). While the criteria for participants in this study included having LD and being members of an inclusion language arts classroom, gender and race are also characteristics that affected the writing experiences of these students. Students with LD have been shown to struggle with all aspects of writing more so than their typical peers (Graham & Harris, 2013). In addition, language, vocabulary, structure, and content of writing are mediated by a person's personal and family background and experiences (Prior, 2006). Black boys are especially affected by gaps between home and school norms and expectations that often place them

outside of the role of writers (Haddix, 2009). Indeed, instead of focusing on teaching Black boys to write in ways that express their unique viewpoints, teachers and schools often focus on socializing and controlling behavior. Thus, students may feel inhibited to write what they want to write or feel that their stories are not relevant or welcome within the confines of their educational experiences. Because all aspects of their experiences affect learning, it is important to keep in mind the entire student context, including their status as Black male adolescents with LD, when considering the results of this study.

In the next section, I individually describe findings for each case in regards to each of the research questions. As described in the methods section, I used constant comparative techniques throughout the data collection and analysis process. This technique involved a cycle of reviewing the data and creating codes, which were then grouped and regrouped to form categories, revisiting data and regrouping. This process was repeated multiple times through the data collection and analysis process in an effort to identify categories that were congruent between all three cases. Within each category, sub-categories were then formed that are unique within each case.

The uniqueness of the subcategories points to the heterogeneity between these three students with LD. As I reviewed findings in this area, I found that in spite of the similarities described, each student differed significantly in regards to his writing. An example of a unique subcategory is evident when I discuss Roy's description of his home writing. Because Roy considers himself a poet and writes poems at home, it was important to include a sub-category under Home and Early Literacy Practices to discuss

his poetry. The other boys did not identify themselves as poets or talk about writing very much at home at all, so there will be different sub-categories for each boy.

Additionally, the data for the study often overlapped in regards to the research questions. For example, as I reviewed data and wrote about Ski's writing experiences, I often found that within the same data were answers about his writing perceptions or what helped and hindered his writing. While I carefully answered each question separately, the tri-lateral use of the data sometimes created a necessity for a hierarchical discussion that looped back to previous questions in order to fully understand the current question.

Ski, Bobby, and Roy, all pseudonyms, worked hard throughout the study to write and to answer my questions and explain their perceptions. The result is a portrait of three different writers who share similar characteristics but who also present unique writing profiles. The next section introduces the reader to each boy and his writing at the time of the study.

Ski

Ski, age 12, lived with his mother and siblings during the study. He described his hobbies as playing the video games *Fortnight, Call of Duty,* and *Sonic Forces* and doing activities with his family that they all like to do. He also told me that he used to live in another state, has been once to the Bahamas, likes watching movies with his family, and sometimes writes letters to his grandparents. His writing hinted of tensions in his life such as people in the neighborhood who did not like his mom, worries about getting to school on time, and one incident where he was physically punished for something he did not do.

Ski was usually quiet and reserved. He had no notable discipline problems in school. He was always polite to me during class and interviews and would sometimes wave to me when I came in to the classroom. Though most of the time he was willing to answer my questions, at one point he politely declined saying that the topic was too personal.

In spite of his reserved nature, Ski did sometimes express his ideas, especially when around his friends. During class discussions he would sometimes quietly talk or laugh with students whom he sat with in class. He became more animated and open when talking about his frustrations with the special education teacher during the focus group interview. One day, just before the Christmas holidays, he surprised me by giving me a hug just before he left class.

According to Mr. Martin, Ski's strength was his engagement in class and his ability to comprehend books that he reads during self-selected reading. Mr. Martin mentioned that when he talked with Ski about those books, he could explain the topics that he was reading. During observations, I noticed that he often read informational books with pictures about animals such as snakes, penguins, or fish. He and his tablemates would occasionally show me a picture or share with me information from one of these books. I often observed Ski reading during self-selected reading but also noted him yawning, sleeping, drawing, fidgeting with his key bob, and looking at his friends.

Mr. Martin described Ski as "really behind skills-wise" indicating that he scored at the K-2 level on all the different types of standardized tests taken in class. He felt that although Ski "really tries," he needed more confidence. A review of assignments

completed during class indicated that he rarely finished his work. During observations, I often noted difficulties with getting started and understanding what to do. It was common when asked if he needed help for Ski to say, "I don't know what to do."

Mr. Martin said that Ski had a very high rate of absenteeism last year and that he was absent a lot at the beginning of this year. During my observations, he was in class most days except for one week when he was absent the entire week with no explanation from parents. Later he said that he was at a funeral. Ski said he had trouble sleeping at night and worried during benchmark testing that he might not get to school in time to begin the tests.

When he had a choice of seating, Ski usually sat with a group of three other boys who often shared books, doodled or drew, and talked quietly to each other. Sometimes, he would sit by himself voluntarily and work on assignments. Often, Mrs. Rigby, the special education teacher, would sit next to Ski and help him with his work. Though Ski cooperated with Mrs. Rigby, he revealed during the focus group and interview that this help was not welcomed.

In the following sections, I describe findings in regard to Ski for each of the three research questions.

Ski's Writing Experiences

At home and at school, Ski primarily wrote to communicate with others and to complete schoolwork. He used both traditional and digital methods to fulfill these purposes by completing mostly short and quick tasks. However, given certain conditions, he expanded his writing to include details, descriptive language, and personal

connections. In this section, I briefly describe Ski's home and early writing experiences and then discuss his writing experiences at school.

Home and early literacy practices. Findings for Ski's home and early writing experiences were limited, as he did not have strong memories about writing when he was younger, nor did he share many examples about writing at home. For example, when asked about home writing, he said that mainly he did homework at home and that this did not involve a lot of writing. However, he said that sometimes when he was finished with homework, he might write a letter if it was a grandparent's birthday or if "something had happened to them." Ski said his mother also wrote letters to family members but that she usually texted them.

Ski talked about playing video games at home and using social media to have discussions with his friends. He said he texted with his friends from school about "gaming, sports, and a bunch of things."

Memories of being bad at writing. While Ski could not remember a lot about learning to write, he did say that he used to be bad at writing, especially spelling and handwriting. He said that he learned to spell by rehearsing the words repeatedly, but that he is still "bad at writing." A review of his written work indicated that he now spells most words correctly, mainly misspelling words when suffixes were added. Further questioning revealed that Ski meant that he was bad at handwriting; I discuss this perception of writing in the next section.

Proud of writing from fifth grade. Ski did recall one thing that he was proud of having written. It was a story that he wrote in the fifth grade about what he would do if

he had $2000 that he could spend in any way that he wanted. He wrote that he would go to the Bahamas. When I asked what he liked about the story, he told me that he had actually been to the Bahamas, which was why he wanted to write about it.

In spite of limited information about home writing, the data show that Ski wrote to communicate with friends and family at home using traditional and digital tools. While he did mention that his mother sometimes wrote letters, there is no mention of other writers in his family or of writing support at home. He texted with friends from school and wrote letters to grandparents. His comment that this happens after he finishes his homework points to a desire to complete required assignments, which is further reflected in the findings about his school writing. While Ski's earliest writing memories incorporate the ideas of writing as being hard and of having trouble with writing and spelling, he mentioned a creative essay that he wrote as a point of pride. It is interesting to note that the positive experience mentioned incorporated a creative story about a place that he had previously visited. Ski's negative experience involved handwriting and spelling. These positive and negative experiences are revisited in the section about writing perceptions.

School writing. When Ski talked about writing at school, he mentioned working hard, trying his best, and trying to get finished on time. He mentioned writing mostly in social studies and language arts and that most of this writing was done to answer questions about what he knows or what he has read. In this section, I carefully review Ski's writing samples while also considering data from interviews and observations to gain a clear understanding of his writing experiences at school.

Works hard to complete writing assignments with moderate success. While Ski wrote to mainly communicate at home, his writing experiences at school largely involved trying to complete classwork assignments correctly and on time. Comments about his classwork implied a level of anxiety about accomplishing his tasks. For example in the following quote**,** Ski said that his hardest class was Social Studies because of the writing requirements that occur at the beginning of class.

> Cause you have to write about what you want to say, and as soon as you come into the room, you have to sit down and do your work like right then - finish your EQ (Essential Questions) questions. I have like 5 minutes to write, so I try to do it as neat and as fast as I can.

It seems that the requirement to begin writing right away and the tight time limit made him feel that the class is hard and that he must try hard to finish and be neat. Further questioning revealed that this overarching effort to finish and complete his writing was not limited to Social Studies. When I asked him to describe what he liked about writing in all classes he thought for a moment and said:

> When I think about my classes, I think about what I am probably going to write about and when I have to write about something, I try to do the best writing that I can…. so I don't mess it up.

It is noteworthy that Ski did not mention anything that he liked about writing in his classes, just that he thought about it and tried to do his best. I wanted to know more about what Ski did when he tried to do his best writing so I asked.

April: What do you do differently when you are trying to do your best?

Ski: I take longer to do, to do better.

April: So, you slow it down. Okay? And what did you mean by mess it up? How would you mess up your work?

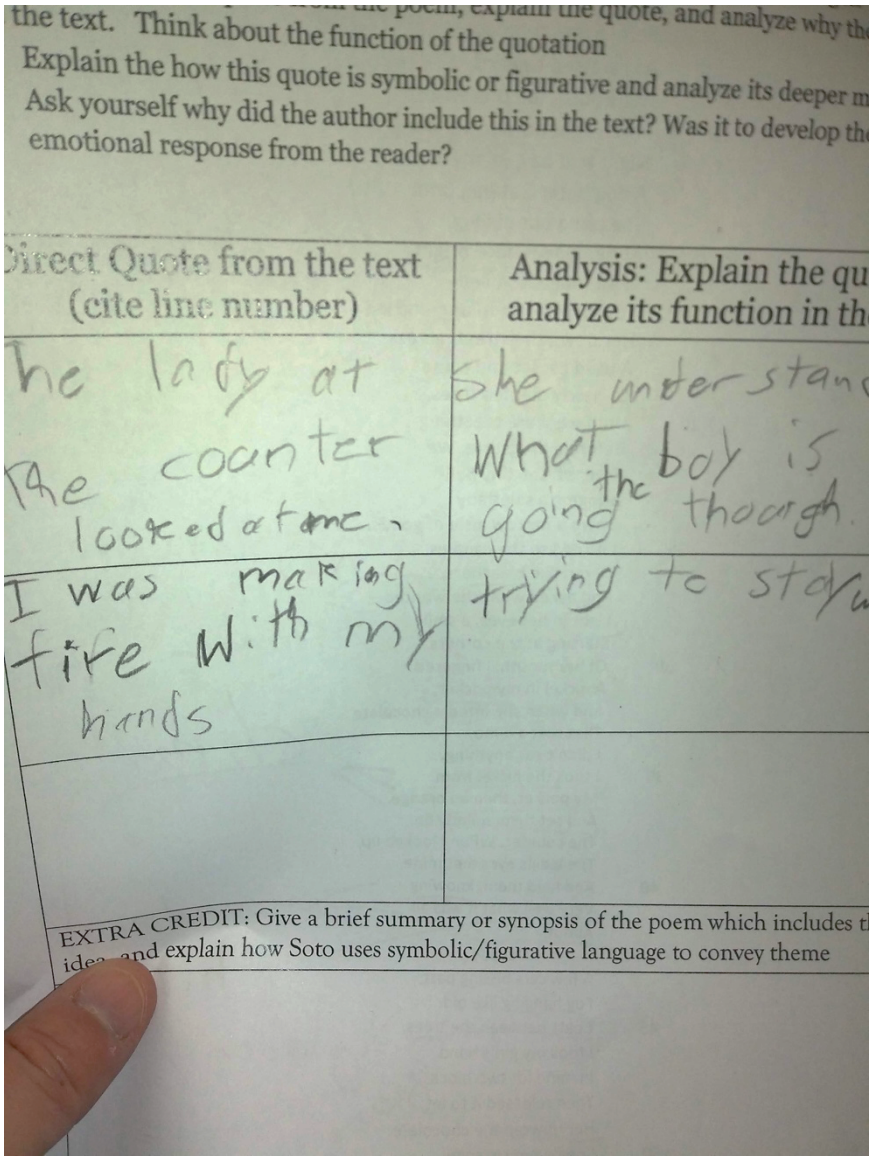
Ski: Probably the write… writing like one word, and then forgetting the rest of the words and then go back to it. So, that's what I do a lot.

Ski's description of his writing experience corroborated Mr. Martin's description of Ski as a diligent worker without confidence. He clearly wanted to finish his work, but the focus on not "messing it up" or writing neatly, along with slowing down and trying harder sometimes resulted in forgetting what he wanted to write. During observations it was noted several times that Ski would write a few words or sentences, then upon being asked a question or given a comment by a teacher, he would immediately turn his pencil over and erase the entire section that he had written. Thus, rather than defend his work or think about what he could change or add, he determined that his work was not good and that he needed to start over.

Observation notes indicated that Ski often asked whoever was helping him if he had done enough, if he was finished, or if he should turn it in now. His determination to finish was highlighted in the last interview when I showed Ski samples of writing pieces that he had completed in language arts and asked which one he liked the best. Rather than choosing one, he said that really he just tried to finish them so he could do something else. Considering Ski's description of early writing being difficult and his limited use of writing at home, it is not surprising that his writing at school focused on completion.

In spite of his efforts, a review of assignments showed that points were often taken off his grade for incomplete work. A close read of other work showed that although Ski wrote something, he did not answer the question fully. Below is an example of a Double Journal Entry assignment that is typical of Ski's work. The class first read a poem then discussed the figurative language in the poem. Ski completed the first two sections in the first column, which required him to choose direct quotes from the reading. In the next section, he was supposed to analyze the quote, which he began to do, but did not complete. For the second quote, he attempted the explanation but his answer "to stay warm" indicated that he did not understand "to build a fire with his hands" was not meant literally but was figurative language.

Figure 4.1 Ski's Incomplete Double Journal Entry


the text. Think about the function of the quotation
Explain the how this quote is symbolic or figurative and analyze its deeper m
Ask yourself why did the author include this in the text? Was it to develop th
emotional response from the reader?

Direct Quote from the text (cite line number)	Analysis: Explain the qu analyze its function in th
The lady at the counter looked at me.	She understand What the boy is going thoough.
I was making fire with my hands	trying to sta

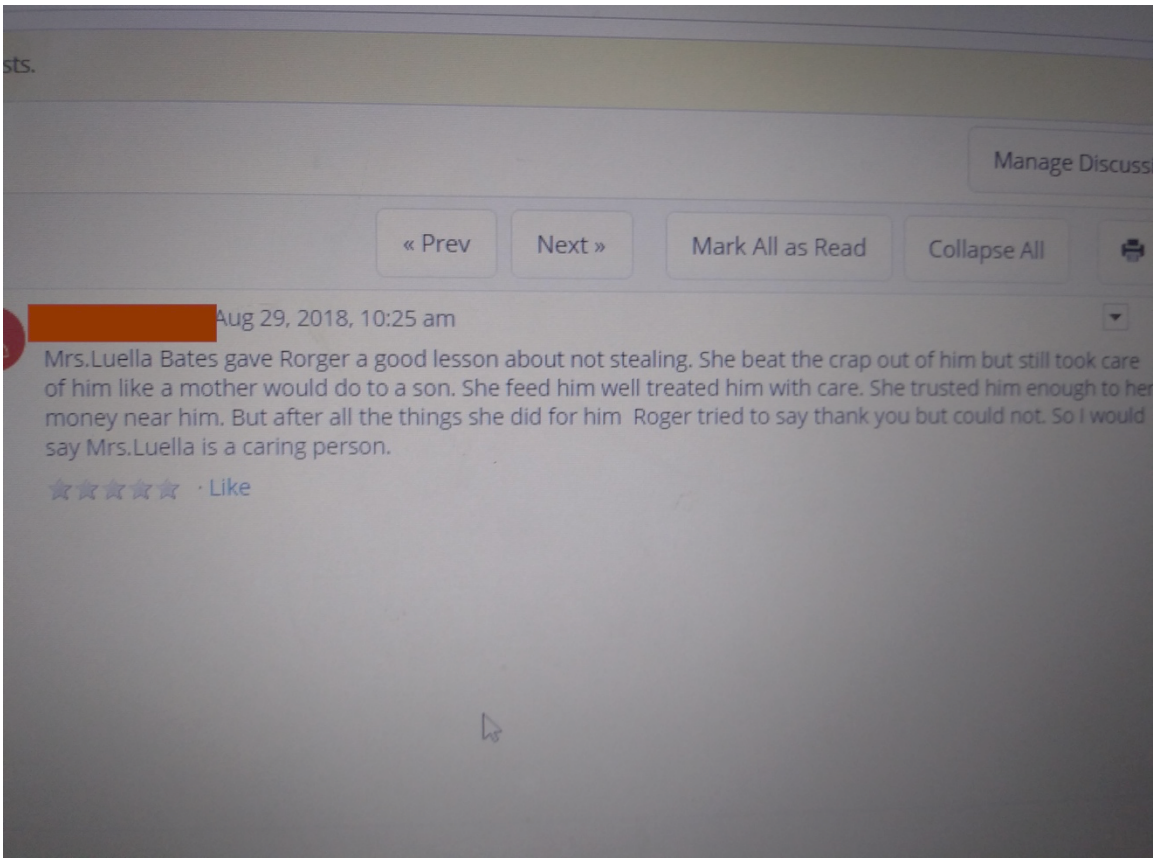
EXTRA CREDIT: Give a brief summary or synopsis of the poem which includes t
ide and explain how Soto uses symbolic/figurative language to convey theme

This task, indicative of the type of writing Ski often experienced at school, was assigned for the purpose of understanding what Ski knew (i.e., how to interpret figurative language). It appears that Ski's difficulty in answering the questions was partially due to not fully understanding the concept of figurative language. In addition, Ski's large print writing style made it difficult to write very much in the boxes provided on the worksheet.

He was struggling to write about a concept he did not understand and did not have space to complete his thoughts. The fact that the assignment was not finished likely added to Ski's frustration since he had expressed such a strong desire to be able to finish his work.

While findings indicate that this type of unfinished writing as a response to reading was common when reviewing artifacts of Ski's writing, a review of his digital bulletin board posts, found work that was more complete. The assignment below was in response to the short story, "Thank You Ma'am," by Langston Hughes. Ski was asked to write whether he thought the main character was a good person.

Figure 4.2 Ski's Digital Bulletin Board Response to *Thank You Ma'am*



Ski wrote a full paragraph for this assignment. The sentence, "She beat the crap out of him but still took care of him like a mother," was expressive and insightful, although a bit exaggerated. Mrs. Luella Bates only gave the boy a kick "right square in his blue-jeaned sitter," but Ski clearly had an opinion of the character and expressed it with supportive details. Perhaps he related to this story more than the poem given his experiences, making it easier to form an opinion and to express it on paper.

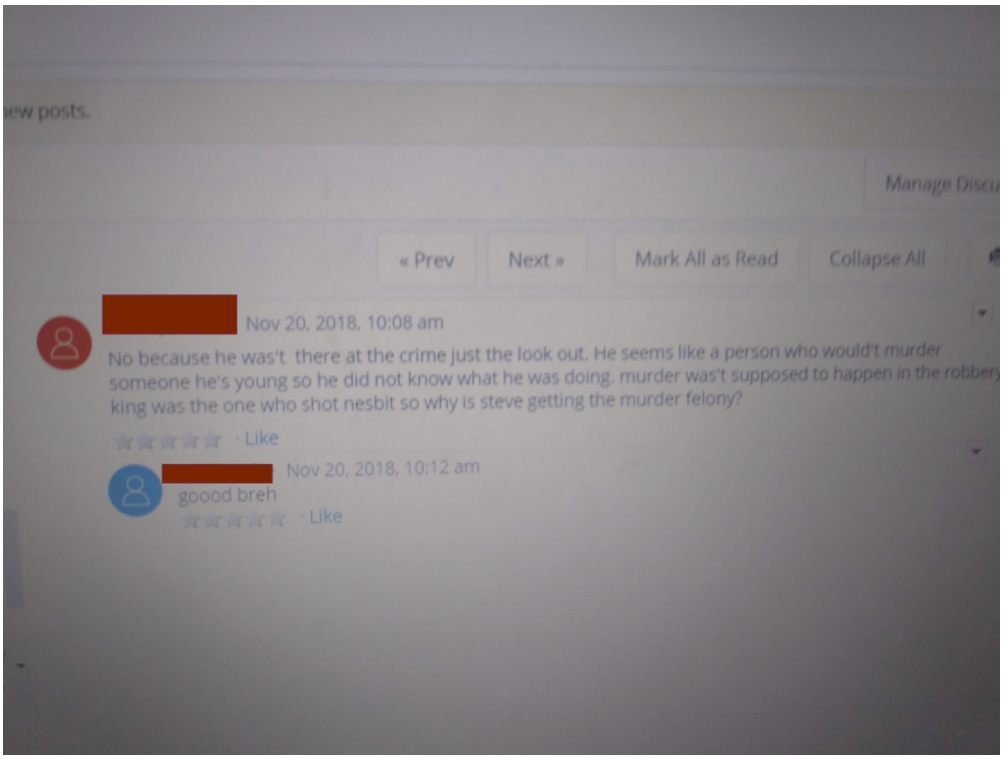
Another digital assignment was a response to reading a section of the novel *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, which is about a teenage boy who is on trial for murder. Students were asked to tell if they thought the character was guilty and to provide reasoning for their belief (Figure 4.3).

In this response, Ski gave an answer with several supporting details and posed a question, "Why is Steve getting the murder felony?" He also received a response from a classmate, "good breh," that, although short, provided feedback. The use of digital technology, as well as the knowledge that his classmates would read and respond to his work, could have worked together to help Ski write more and more clearly when responding to reading.

However, there were times when Ski was not able to use or access the digital technology as quickly as the other students. When he was working on a Lucid chart, for example, I noted that Ski had built a chart but had not added any text. When I asked if he needed help, he explained that he knew what he wanted to say but that he could not figure out how to put the text in the boxes. I was able to quickly show Ski how to place a text

box in the chart, which would allow him to type into the chart. Not knowing how to do this on his own slowed his progress down.

Figure 4.3 Ski's Digital Bulletin Board Response to *Monster*

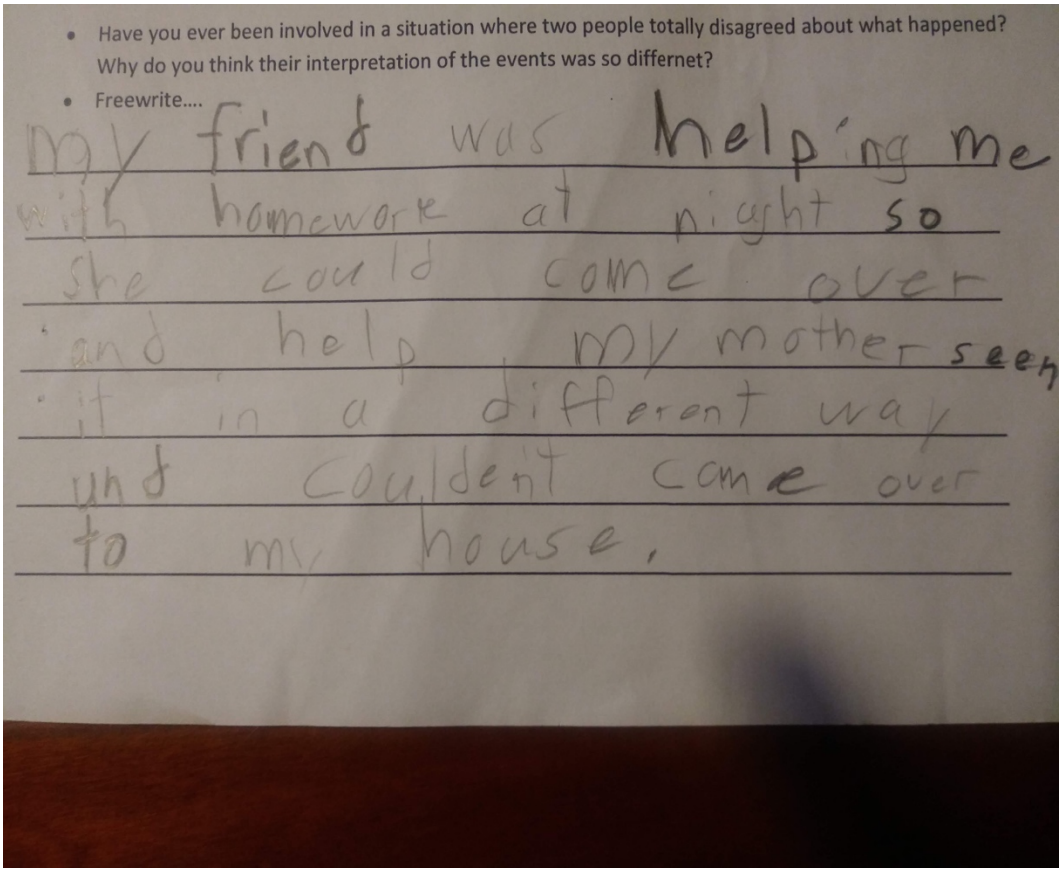


Shares personal opinions and connections with limited clarity. Examples of Ski's writing corroborated a desire to write in order to complete the assignments but also indicated a struggle to complete ideas given the time constraints of the classroom. Often Ski would complete some writing for each assignment but not give details or express an opinion, even when this was part of the assignment. For instance, in all the samples of "bell work" I collected, Ski always chose to write in response to the prompt instead of choosing his own topic. Furthermore, even when the prompt encouraged students to

write about something personal or to share an opinion, Ski often wrote only limited amounts without many details. When he did share an example from his own life, he tended to give only essential information.

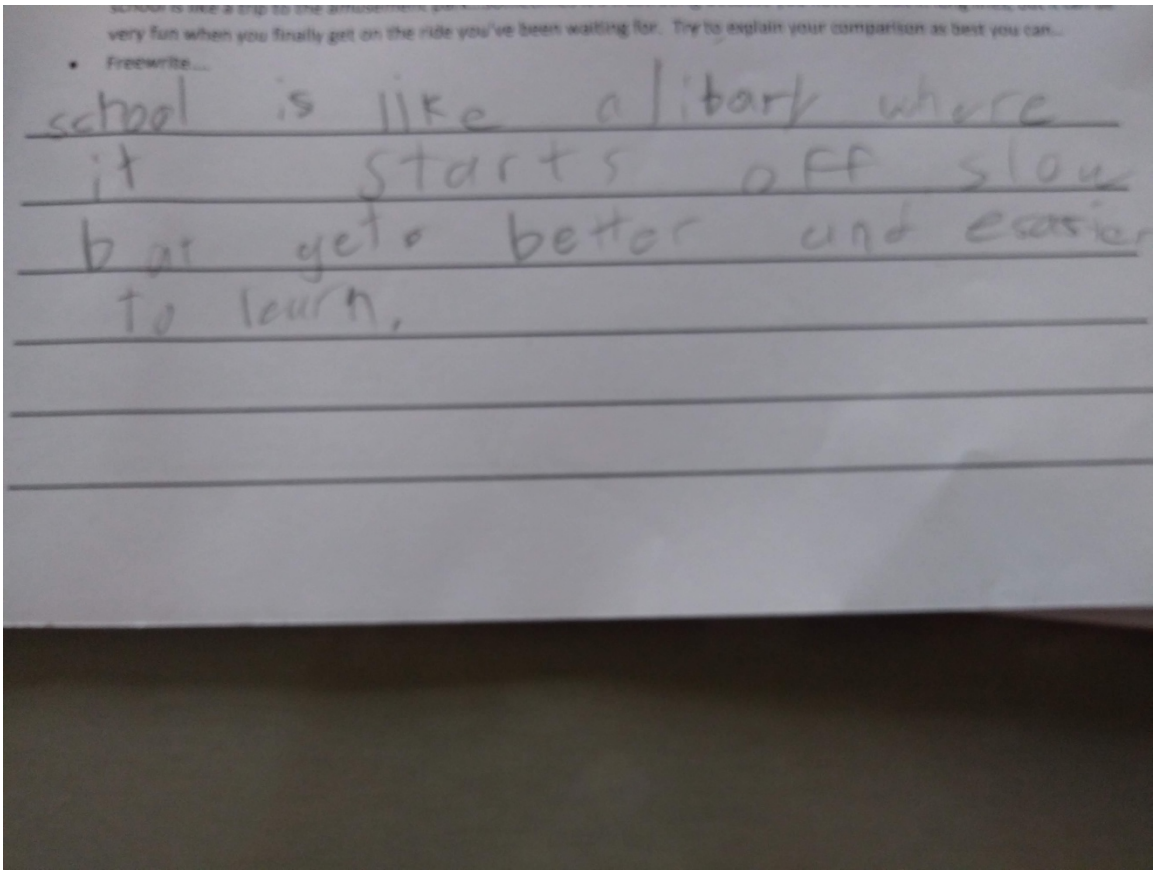
Here is an example of Ski describing a situation at home in which he and his mother had a disagreement.

Figure 4.4 Ski's Description of a Disagreement



Ski answered the required question but did not give further details or express emotions about the incident. This may be because he filled up all the space allotted on the sheet. In another "bell work" prompt, students were asked to use an analogy to describe school. The purpose of this prompt was to assess students' abilities to write using an analogy but also to invite them to express their personal ideas about school. One student in the class, for example, used this opportunity to compare school to a jail and to express his frustration at the level of control the school imposed on the students. Ski, however, compared school to a library.

Figure 4.5 Ski's School Analogy



After reading his response, I did not understand how he made the connection between a library and a school, so I asked him to explain. Ski told me that when he first goes to the library at school, he doesn't really know what to do, but after he has been there a while, he figures out what kind of books he wants to look at and gets comfortable. He then explained that this was the same way he felt at school. It took a while for him to figure out what to do. This conversation revealed that he understood the concept of analogy and was expressing a personal understanding that he needs time to adjust and get comfortable with books as well as school in general. Combined with Ski's explanation that his hardest class requires him to complete writing quickly, I was able to better understand the analogy as he shared it. Perhaps the time given to write his answer was not sufficient considering the time Ski needed to think about the prompt, conceptualize his answer, and convert it to print.

Writes more with higher quality given time and support. Based on these observations, short assignments, and discussions, Ski's writing experiences at school centered around trying to finish his work and do it correctly, but his work was often incomplete or inaccurate. Whereas there were hints of opinions or personal connection in his work, elaboration and detailed explanations were often absent. An exception to this rule was demonstrated by Ski's narrative writing piece.

The narrative writing assignment, the longest and most personal piece of writing done during the semester, was the only assignment that took place over multiple days. Students used paper-planning documents and wrote their stories using Google docs. During this time, students were encouraged to write about something that was meaningful

to them, were supported by teachers, had time to reflect on their topic, and were encouraged make changes and additions to their writing.

During the planning stage for the narrative writing, students thought of three topics about which they might write. Ski, however, only listed the one idea on his planning document: "I cut my head at a movie theater when I was 5." He said that he chose this topic because it was an event he remembered well, and he had almost died. He explained that he needed to write about something that had enough details that he remembered. Thus, even in the process of choosing a topic, Ski was concerned about being able to finish the assignment. However, he also indicated a personal reason for choosing the topic—it was important to him because he almost died.

Observation notes mentioned that Ski asked if he was finished several times during the writing process, the first time when he had only a few lines written that gave a skeletal idea of the event. He seemed to need prompting to help him think of details to add. For example, when consulting with him, I often asked questions about his story, which usually resulted in the addition of a sentence of two. For example, he added, "The popcorn smelled tasty," when I asked what he remembered about the movie theater.

When Mr. Martin read Ski's almost completed story, he asked, "Did you really dream about Sponge Bob? That is funny!" He also asked him to include what he learned in the experience, pointing out that this was an important part of narrative writing.

A review of the final written piece indicated several elements in this writing that were not often found in the other writing samples from Ski's classwork. There were

examples of powerful imagery, bits of humor, and a touch of drama and suspense mixed with irony.

These phrases used visual and auditory cues to paint a scene of trauma and urgency. There was a bit of suspense as Ski described everything going black:

> My head fell on the metal side of the walking path my mother heard the bang of my head hitting the metal. My head cut straight open everything for me. … I woke up on a bed moving to the surgery room everyone yelling move, out of the way and other things. I looked at my hand it blood all over it then they put on me a gas tank so I would go to sleep.

There were also hints of humor in the writing piece, "For some reason i was dreaming of spongebob [sic]. I woke up in a bed with bandages on my head. My mother was looking at me like god saved my son again."

The comment about SpongeBob provided humor in the midst of a not so funny story. The addition of his mother's voice in the piece gave it a poignancy that left an impression of the deep concern of a mother for her son. Near the end of the piece, Ski wrote, "We went back home so nothing dangerous would hurt me or my brother. But every night I wake of me falling off something that reminds me of falling and cutting my head open."

Here, there was a sense of irony as Ski described home as a place of safety, but his continual dreams showed that he was still affected by the accident.

This writing sample shows that with support and sufficient time, Ski was able to include meaningful personal details with a hint of suspense and humor in his story. This can be contributed to several factors. The classroom environment changed somewhat

while students were working on this assignment. Whereas usually short assignments were given with only a few minutes to gather thoughts and complete the task, this writing piece took several days, and ample classroom time was given to work on the piece. This, along with the supportive environment and the fact that the students chose the topic they wrote about, resulted in better writing.

Summary. Most of the time, Ski experienced writing as mainly a purposeful process used to communicate with others at home and to complete assignments at school. He worked hard to finish his writing assignments but usually was only able to partially complete the work and felt stress due to time limitations and school expectations. Most of his writing was short answer or short paragraphs that are two or three sentences. Exceptions to this generalization were posts on the digital bulletin board, which were slightly longer and seemed to fulfill the assigned task and the narrative writing assignment, which took place over several days. In some cases, Ski did not understand the instructions for the assignments and other times he struggled with the concepts about which he was asked to write. Occasionally he struggled with using the digital or online technology that students needed to access to complete projects.

Ski's main goals for his writing were to complete his work and not "mess it up." However, the narrative writing piece indicated that with support, he was able to write more and include details especially about personal experiences. His writing, as evidenced here, has potential to be meaningful, funny, and poignant, but his writing experiences at school or at home do not seem to build upon this potential. Written feedback from the teacher usually simply included a grade or a note reminding the

student of the requirements. Chances to revise or conference with writing were limited to rare moments. Most one-on-one help involved working to complete a first draft in order to turn it in for a grade. In the next section, I consider how Ski perceived writing and how these experiences may have affected the perception he had of both his ability to write as well as the overall all purposes and meaning of writing.

Ski's Writing Perceptions

Ski described his writing ability in negative terms throughout the study. In order to fully understand his writing perceptions, I asked Ski about the definition, purpose, and tools used for writing. Ski's definition centered on the purpose of writing, but in regard to his writing ability, he seemed focused on handwriting and mechanics. Below I describe some of the conversation that we had about Ski's writing perceptions.

What is writing: **Definition and perception of writing ability**. Ski's perception of his own writing ability seems to depend upon his definition of writing. Whenever I talked with Ski about his writing, he said that he was a bad writer or that his writing was bad. Here is a conversation we had about his writing:

April: Tell me about that, why do you think your writing is bad?

Ski: Meaning like...I am not a very good writer.

April: How are you not a good writer?

Ski: Like, I don't write as good as other people.

April: Okay, well, here is a question. Just in general, what makes writing good?

Ski: By how accurate you can like see the words…

This conversation indicated that when Ski said his writing is bad, he was referring to handwriting—his ability to write clear letters using a pencil or pen. This idea was confirmed when I asked Ski if he thought his writing was improving.

> **April**: So, in Mr. Martin's class so far do you think your writing is getting better or worse or the same?
>
> **Ski**: It is getting kind of better and the same.
>
> **April**: Ok, tell me how it is getting better.
>
> **Ski**: Well, when we start writing, it makes me do it faster and better.
>
> **April**: Ok, so it's faster as far as actually getting your thoughts down on paper. And do you feel like when you say better do you mean neater or do you mean….
>
> **Ski** (Interrupting): Ya' like neater
>
> **April**: Ok, what about the content about what you're are writing?
>
> **Ski**: Ya'...the content is good.

Only when prompted did Ski mention the content of his writing and in spite of constantly telling me he was a bad writer, he said his content was good. Trying to move the focus of writing to the content, I asked him to define writing. Interestingly, his first answer focused on the function of writing, rather than the mechanics. He explained, "Like somehow, you want to say something but not by talking…like if someone is from afar…you can just like write it out...what you want to say."

Later he described writing as "talking out loud," and mentioned that you could write someone a letter to facilitate conversation from far away.

Ski: Ya like if ya'll are too far away from each other you can like write...like a letter.

April: So you can write letters…what else can you write?

Ski: A memo, a poem, hmmm.... and a lot more things but I do not know how to say it.

April: Does writing include doing things on a computer, like texting or videos? You have already mentioned poetry. Is poetry writing? What about spoken word poetry? Tell me what you think about that?

Ski: Hmmm…. I don't even know if I have thought about that…. but when I think about it…. it takes a while to do things like to write and stuff and to think about what you are going to say.

This conversation confirmed that Ski's view of writing moved beyond the mechanical when he was not describing his own writing ability. However, his definition of writing was somewhat narrow (i.e., writing can include poems or memos, but he is not sure about texting, videos, or spoken word poetry). Whenever I asked Ski about texting or using the computer, he agreed with me that these activities could be included in writing, but he never mentioned this without prompting. I asked Ski if he thought his writing had improved, and he said that it was the same as it had always been, but he was getting better, faster, and neater. Clearly, here, the focus was still on the production of text.

What makes good writing? Because Ski seemed to focus on handwriting or text production whenever I asked him about writing, I moved the conversation toward books that he had read in an effort to stimulate conversation about content. I asked him to describe a book that he liked and what he liked about it. He mentioned *The Giver*, by

Lois Lowry, a book that the class was reading together and told me that he liked drama and “suspension.”

Ski: "The drama goes with the suspension.

April: Okay.

Ski: So it will mean like something is about to go down. And something is and it doesn’t, it changes into something else.

This comment indicated that in spite of generally considering the purpose of writing to be communicating information (i.e., writing is a way of talking) and a focusing on handwriting, that Ski sometimes perceived writing as having other functions (e.g., to entertain or to provide suspense).

Going back to focus on his own writing, I asked Ski if he thought the content or the ideas of his writing was bad as well as his handwriting. Just as in the earlier conversation, when prompted, Ski said that he thought the content of his writing was good. Later we talked about Ski's narrative writing piece, and once again, he expressed that he thought the writing was good. I asked him what grade he would have given himself for this project and he said a B+, indicating that he could have included more details to make it an A.

Summary. Considering that Ski's writing experiences both at home and at school tended to focus on the functional—completing assignments and communicating—it is not surprising that his definition and general conception of writing focused on handwriting, and communication. However, because his writing experiences at school included often using the laptop and software such as digital bulletin boards to complete assignments

successfully, I expected him to be more open to the idea of digital writing and texting in his definition of writing.

His perception of writing as text production and his emphasis on the functional purpose of writing directly affected Ski's understanding of his own writing ability. In addition, his writing experiences were strongly affected by this view of writing. Thinking back to Ski's choice of topic for his narrative writing piece, it made sense that he made sure to choose a topic about which he could remember many details. His main goal was to finish his work and having a topic in which he knew a lot about would facilitate that process.

Ski did talk about the entertainment value of writing and the importance of suspense and drama. Although he did not seem to value these attributes when describing his writing ability, he did try to include drama and suspense in his narrative writing piece. When asked about content specifically, he rated his writing much higher than when he spoke about writing generally.

It is important to consider Ski's perception of writing while thinking about the third research question, "What factors help or hinder Ski's writing?"

What Helps or Hinders Ski's Writing Process?

The following discussion considers how Ski was supported in the context of the classroom-writing environment. As mentioned earlier, Ski was a student who worked hard on his assignments. He clearly wanted to complete his assignments and do them correctly and often his focus was on himself when discussing factors that help him with

his writing. This section considers how Ski helped himself as well as how his teachers, peers, and the classroom environment affected his writing.

Self. Ski's conversation about his writing often included phrases about trying (e.g., try harder, work harder, trying not to mess up). He also talked about slowing down. Because he seemed focused on his own ability to improve, I asked him what he did to help himself write better:

Ski: I try to work better on my writing skills.

April: What do you do differently when you are trying to do your best?

Ski: I take longer to do, to do better.

Supported by Mr. Martin's description of Ski as a diligent worker, evidence indicated that Ski believed he could do better if he tried. During the discussion about his narrative writing piece, Ski confirmed that he thought working harder would improve his writing. When I asked what grade he would have given himself, Ski said, "B+." When I asked, why not an A, he said, "I could have added some more details or made it longer."

Ski clearly considered himself an important part of improving his own writing. He was able to tell some things that he could do to make his writing better; however, he was not able to verbally describe strategies such a planning, editing or rereading that he could have used to improve his writing.

Teachers. Ski did not have a lot to say about how Mr. Martin helped him except to say that Mr. Martin slowed things down and explained things to him. When I asked what he wished Mr. Martin would do differently he said, "Really things are fine."

During observations, I occasionally saw Mr. Martin work independently with Ski. This was usually not for more than a minute or two, however, as he always had to move on to another student. Ski did often receive help from Mrs. Rigby, the special education teacher, but did not seem to appreciate or perhaps even understand the help that he got from this teacher. During the focus group, Ski elicited laughter from the other boys when he imitated the way the special education teacher looked over his shoulder during class. He and the other boys seemed to think that her main purpose was to keep them on task. Ski said, "Sometimes you need a break" when describing his feelings about her help.

Just before one of my interviews with Ski, I observed Mrs. Rigby working with him on a Web quest assignment. This involved reading several documents online and completing a worksheet with questions about the reading. Later, during the interview, I asked Ski about this experience: did he enjoy the assignment and was he able to complete it? His response was a bit jumbled as he said that he was able to do the assignment because of her help, but then he also said that he felt like she was telling him to put things in the wrong boxes. Below is a bit of the conversation:

> **Ski**: I finished it okay because you know that girl that was next to me she was telling me to tell more about this and that. She told me more about this and the other, more about the question. She was telling me more about the story than I wanted to know.
>
> **April**: Okay. Okay. So you needed to know ...what is... describe a piece of evidence... so tell me like what do you think should have gone into this box right here. For this first one.
>
> **Ski**: When I figured out the evidence I was going to put it in this one but she said to put it in this one.
>
> **April**: Okay so what words did you put in in?

Ski: I put the words that were on the ummm

April: Can you just ...it doesn't have to be the exact words but can you kind of remember... what you thought should go here, but she said it should go there. What were you talking about?

Ski: It was the evidence to the to the question

April: Okay.

Ski: I then I was going to put that down because that is the best thing to do.

April: So it kind confused you because the Mrs. Rigby wanted you to put it here instead of here. Did you get to the second one?

Ski: But I didn't know how to do it 'cause I didn't know how to do the first one.

It is clear that Ski was very confused about what to do for this particular assignment even though he received one-on-one assistance from Mrs. Rigby. In fact, in spite of the help he received, he had no idea how to approach the second question. In addition, he did not seem to think that her advice was correct. He also was not clear about Mrs. Rigby's role, referring to her first as "that girl" and finally as a "teacher's aide."

Ski saw his teachers' roles as helping him to understand and complete the assignment or keeping him on task. As mentioned earlier, he often said he did not know what to do or asked for confirmation that he was finished. He liked that Mr. Martin explained things to him and provided models but generally, any individual support from teachers that he sought was focused on completing the work.

Peers. In inclusion classrooms, peer support is often used to provide assistance for students. As mentioned in the context section previously, students generally sat in

groups and often were allowed to talk with each other or seek help from their peers during the writing time. During my observations, however, there were few structured peer collaboration activities. Still, Ski and his peers seemed to naturally support one another and had developed their own methods of collaboration.

Ski usually sat in a group of four boys, including Roy from this study. As I observed these boys during class, I noticed a subtle but regular routine of conversation and interaction. During self-selected reading, I sometimes saw students in this group secretly drawing and sharing their drawings with each other. In one interaction, I saw Ski look up and then quickly switch his paper with another student. The students were often reading similar books and sometimes would switch books during reading time as well.

During class discussions, students would often make quiet comments to each other about the topic rather than raising their hands and making comments to the whole class. Sometimes, Mr. Martin would hear the comments and respond. For example, once he said, "Say that again, that was brilliant." More often than not, however, the comment was simply shared among the small group of friends.

During independent work times, students generally worked alone but were allowed to seek help from each other if they wished. When I asked Ski about getting help from his peers, he said,

> **Ski**: So if it is me and one of my friends, we will talk but we still write about what we are doing…
>
> **April**: Ok, so you are kind of talking and writing at the same time. Are you talking about what you are writing or are you talking about other stuff?

Ski: We are talking about other stuff, but we are still concentrated on the um...task.

April: Do you think being able to talk helps make you concentrate more or does it distract you more?

Ski: Ya…it probably helps me concentrate more…but it is with certain people.

April: Ok, that is interesting because some teachers would say if you are talking that means that you are not concentrating. However, you are saying it helps you concentrate. Can you explain that?

Ski: I don't even know. You know for some reason. It is like we are talking and then we go back to our work and then five minutes later we go back to talking again.

The previous statement is the most cognizant comment I obtained from Ski concerning his writing process. Whereas he seemed to struggle with telling me how he could make his writing better or what his teachers could do, he definitely seemed to understand that talking with his peers was important.

Peer influence and interaction was highlighted when the students made Zines, mini-magazines consisting of text and visuals usually focused on one topic. As mentioned, most assignments in the class were directed and specific, not allowing for choice in topic. However, one day, Mr. Martin decided to have the students create Zines using a single piece of notebook paper folded in such a way as to create a small booklet. Students were allowed to choose any topic to explain using text and illustrations. I circulated around the classroom during this project, helping the students with the folding activity and inquiring as to the topics they had chosen. All four boys in Ski's group decided to create their Zine about a different character from the video game, *Undertow*. This prompted Mr. Martin to begin referring to the group as the *Undertow* boys. They

quickly negotiated who would write about which character and began working to illustrate the Zines. Papers were passed back and forth multiple times as others in the group commented or added details to the drawings.

These observations as well as Ski's own interpretation of his peer discussions during writing highlighted the influence of peers during the writing process for Ski. The peer interaction, although not usually structured and sometimes illicit, provided a sounding board for Ski's ideas that he might not be willing to share with the entire class. Through informal sharing of books and drawings, important connections were made that influenced Ski's choices of topic and validate his interests. Most interestingly, Ski's explanation of how talking with his peers moves his writing forward emphasized the importance and value of peer collaboration.

Conclusion

Ski put most of the responsibility for improving his writing on his own effort but did not mention writing strategies or skills such as planning, revising, or rereading as ways that he can help himself. Most of the individual assistance Ski received came from his special education teacher, however, he did not appreciate or understand this help. Rather, he saw the function of this teacher as keeping him on task. It did appear that Ski understood the importance of context, especially of being able to work at his own pace, take breaks when needed, and talk with his friends. His interaction with his peers provided rich learning moments as he not only shared some writing/drawing tasks, but also discussed books and poems the class and individuals were reading.

Ski's writing had the potential to tell stories, to entertain, and to express serious emotions of a middle-schooler. When Ski was allowed to write about himself, he wrote with a poignancy that included humor, rich descriptions and hinted at strong feelings and ideas. While he worked hard to complete assignments that involved writing at school, his work was often incomplete or inaccurate, especially when attempting to respond to reading or answer specific questions that he may not have understood. His focus on the mechanical and functional aspects of writing seemed to override any benefits of learning through writing and left him with a negative view of his own writing skills.

Ski worked hard to improve his writing and complete his work. However, he did not know specific strategies he could use to improve. He received some individual support from teachers, but he did not appreciate this help. The richest part of Ski's writing experience at school came from his peer interactions.

Most of the time, Ski did not perceive writing as a way to express himself, but when given the opportunity, he would share some personal experiences through writing. Whereas there are hints of emotion and frustration in his writing, it could be that Ski did not see school as a safe place to express himself.

Bobby

Bobby, age 15, is a tall, active, and friendly Black boy, who enjoyed socializing with his classmates. He told me that his father left him when he was 6 months old and that he lost his mother to cancer at age 10; his teacher confirmed this information. At the time of the study, however, he lived with his father, stepmother, and siblings. Sometimes his parents argued and this bothered him. He made himself a sandwich each morning,

which he brought to school to eat in addition to his school lunch. Early in the school year, Bobby told me that his career goals were to be a football player or to own a shoe store. He said that he wanted to go to a magnet high school in the county that focuses on STEM (Science, Math, Engineering and Technology) because he had heard that this is a good school. His parents wanted him to go to the traditional high school that is closest to their home.

Bobby often moved about the classroom during instruction and discussion time. For example, he sometimes slouched on a small couch in front of the teacher's desk while reading, moved to another seat during class discussion, and to still another area in the classroom later. During class discussion, he would often look over his shoulder or across the room at classmates making eye contact. Mr. Martin regularly asked Bobby to pass out computers, take up books, and collect papers. He did this willingly but somewhat slowly, stopping along the way to talk to peers and make comments.

Although his movements were sometimes slightly disruptive, the teacher usually ignored it. For example, during a whole class guided reading activity, Bobby moved his books to a single desk in the front center of the room, turned the desk around backwards making a scraping noise and leaned over the back of the seat to reach his paper. He then stayed in this position, leaning over the back of the seat during the rest of the activity.

Mr. Martin said he allowed Bobby to move about the classroom because he is a "wanderer" and "is distracted." He said other teachers allow this as well but perhaps not as much as he does. He described Bobby's test scores as "obscenely low" even though he did fine in language arts because he "did what he is supposed to do." He felt like Bobby

"needed to trust himself," describing an incident in which Bobby was able to answer a question correctly after Mr. Martin reread the question to him but did not offer any other help. He said that he thought Bobby was "settled in in spite of the turbulence in his life."

Bobby's hobbies were playing video games and sports, specifically football and basketball. When I first asked about hobbies, he told me about playing video games and then said, "Wait, I need to tell you about something different than being on my phone all day." Bobby also played in the band at school and told me he liked listening to music. His favorite rapper was MBA Young Boy.

Bobby's Writing Experiences

Home and early literacy practices.

Imaginative writing and distractions. Bobby was not able to remember many writing experiences from his younger years. However, he told me about a story he wrote when he was young about SpongeBob, a character from a popular children's TV show. It was short, but he wrote it because he liked the TV show. He also told me that he sometimes wrote about having an imaginary friend. He could not remember much about these stories. In fact, he told me that writing was not very important to him when he was younger and that he had found it challenging. He recalled,

> Coming up as a little kid, learning to write, ABC's and all that. See, me, I would, when I was a kid, I would usually forget stuff and push that to the side and be involved in another thing that is interesting to me. But like when I was in school, I would after, right after school whatever I was being taught that day I would forget it and pay attention on going outside and playing with my friends…. even if I did have homework, it wouldn't be a major thing [*sic*].

While Bobby told me this story in response to my question about how writing was challenging for him, I interpreted it as a description about his lack of desire to write and do homework. He did not want to do it because he was interested in going outside and playing with his friends. When I asked him if this had changed, if he did better completing his writing homework and writing now, he hesitated then said, "Ya…A little bit"

Indeed findings in the study indicated that he did do some writing at home. He wrote at home when he had to for homework and used social media regularly. When I asked about what he did at home he said, "I am either on Facebook or Snapchat, or doing homework."

Social media to keep up with the world. Bobby used social media, specifically Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook at home to communicate with friends. He mentioned using social media to post quotes and pictures about songs or about sports. He also used social media to keep up with the news. "I watch sports on Instagram, so I keep up with drama, and celebrities, and the world and stuff like that." Bobby sometimes had discussions with people that he knows on social media. During these discussions, he would post something and other people would comment back.

Homework and classwork. Bobby said he could get more writing done at home where there were fewer distractions than at school and often set aside class assignments to do at home. Mr. Martin did not agree with this statement saying that he rarely received classwork done at home. However, toward the end of the data collection period, Bobby completed two stories at home as part of his Language Acquisition Framework (LAF)

packet. This weekly assignment presented vocabulary words that the students would encounter in their reading during the week. Students were first asked to find definitions of each word and copy them verbatim. Next students were supposed to write their own definitions and make drawings to illustrate the meaning of each word. Lastly, students were to use each word in a short story or paragraph.

As part of this last section, Bobby had written two stories that he brought to school. This writing was personal and meaningful to Bobby, and it appeared to motivate him to share the writing with his teacher as well as with me. The first story was about Bobby's last football game of the season. The piece had several poignant personal descriptions of Bobby's thoughts. For example, he wrote, “Everybody wants to win and not lose all the time. I cried because I wanted it so bad and we missed our mark. All year we been [*sic*] doubted and we got a shot and missed.”

This story included his feelings about people who were making fun of the team, which he described as "clowning on us." Mr. Martin told Bobby he enjoyed the story and made sure that I saw it. I talked with him about the story and asked permission to take a picture of it so I could include it in the research study. I told Bobby that I liked the story and hoped maybe that he would write more about himself.

On my last day in the classroom, Bobby approached his teacher and asked, "Did you show her?” He was talking about another story he had written for the last page of his LAF and he wanted me to see it before I left.

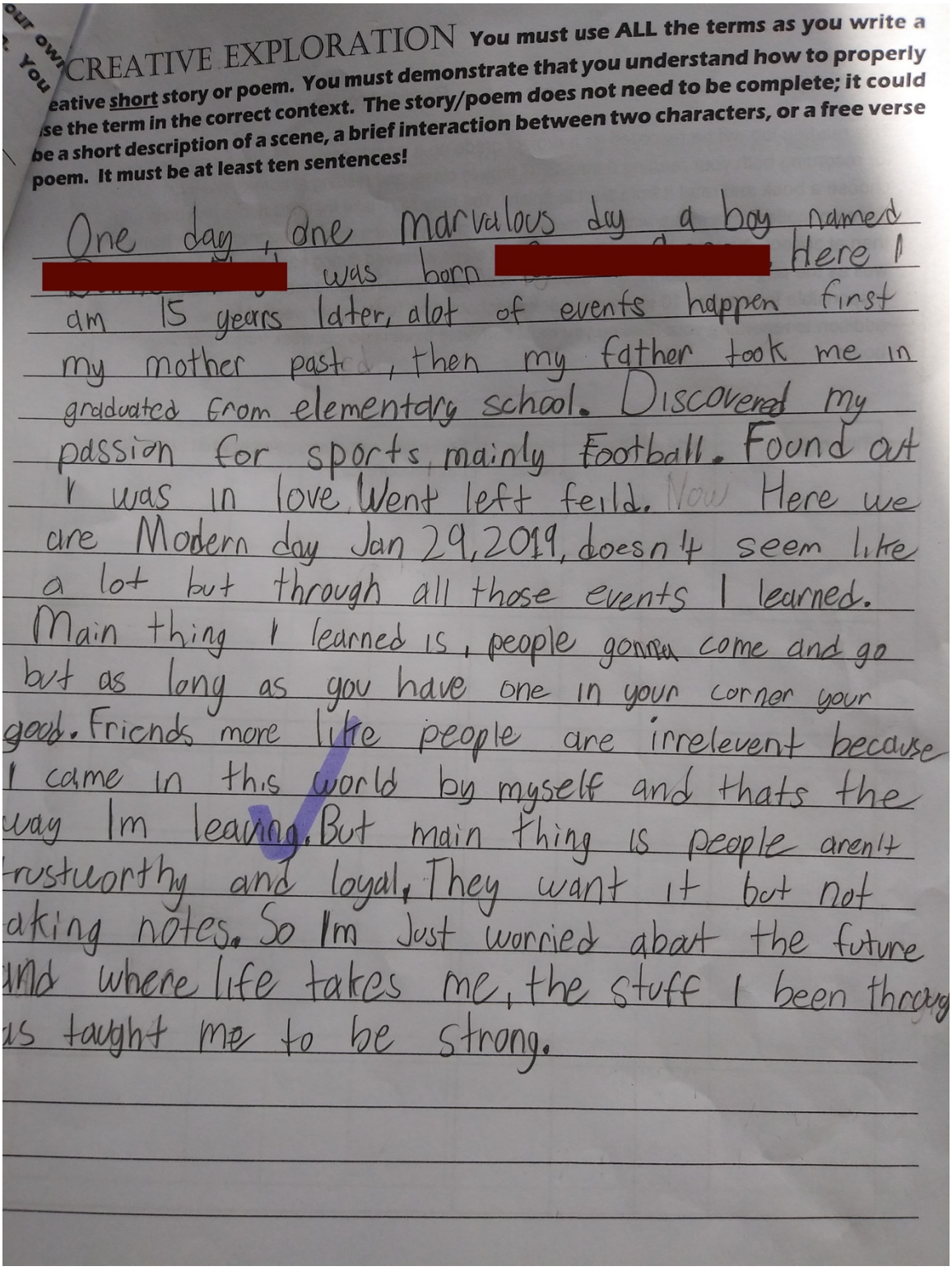
The story was a biography. It began cheerfully, characterizing the day he was born as "marvelous." The story told about hardships in his life but also about his love for

football. Next, the writing became introspective talking about the importance of friendships but also the struggle with friends and not being able to trust people. Bobby's story ends with a statement of concern about the future and one final note of positivity saying that he has learned to be strong (Figure 4.6).

After reading the story, I talked with Bobby about it and he said he enjoyed writing about his life. I mentioned that throughout the year, I had not seen any stories like this and asked why he decided to begin writing them. "I don't know," he said, "I just write them." The combination of attention given to Bobby by my presence in the classroom and the attention given to him by his teacher could have motivated Bobby to write more stories at home. Thus, it appears that having support at school, having an audience to read and comment on his work, having the flexibility to work at home and having extended time to work motivated Bobby to write more.

Later, while working on the analysis for this study, I took a careful look at the entire LAF packets. I realized that Bobby did not use the words from page one (the ones he was supposed to be learning) in the story. On page two of the packet, instructions are to write the definition of each word in their own words and to draw a picture. On both packets, Bobby had made up his own words for page two and used those words in his story. For example, the words on the first page for the most recent LAF were: epoch, conventional, tirade, imperative, and phenomenon. Bobby defined these words and found antonyms and synonyms for each word on page one. However, on page two he drew pictures illustrating the meaning of: trustworthy, irrelevant, love, passion, and mother. These words were then used in his personal story.

Figure 4.6 Bobby's Personal Story



CREATIVE EXPLORATION **You must use ALL the terms as you write a creative short story or poem. You must demonstrate that you understand how to properly use the term in the correct context. The story/poem does not need to be complete; it could be a short description of a scene, a brief interaction between two characters, or a free verse poem. It must be at least ten sentences!**

One day, one marvalous day a boy named [redacted] was born [redacted] Here I am 15 years later, alot of events happen first my mother past, then my father took me in graduated from elementary school. Discovered my passion for sports, mainly Football. Found out I was in love. Went left feild. Now Here we are Modern day Jan 29, 2019, doesn't seem like a lot but through all those events I learned. Main thing I learned is, people gonna come and go but as long as you have one in your corner your good. Friends more like people are irrelevent because I came in this world by myself and thats the way Im leaving. But main thing is people aren't trustworthy and loyal. They want it but not taking notes. So Im just worried abaut the future and where life takes me, the stuff I been through has taught me to be strong.

I looked back at all the LAF's I had and found that this had happened several times, although he had only written two stories. Each time he received full credit for completing the page even though he had not used the correct words. This indicated to me that Bobby knew what he wanted to write and manipulated the assignment so that he could write the story he wanted.

Bobby had a variety of writing experiences at home. He both consumed and produced writing through social media and interacted with friends through this format. He also completed traditional writing assignments and perceived home as a place with fewer distractions where he could write. Although he did not have a lot of parental help with his homework, they did facilitate its completion. Though she did not live in his house, the fact that his cousin was able to help him with his writing was important to him. Regardless of his level of help, he was able to write at home when motivated to do so and in some cases his home writing was more meaningful than his writing at school.

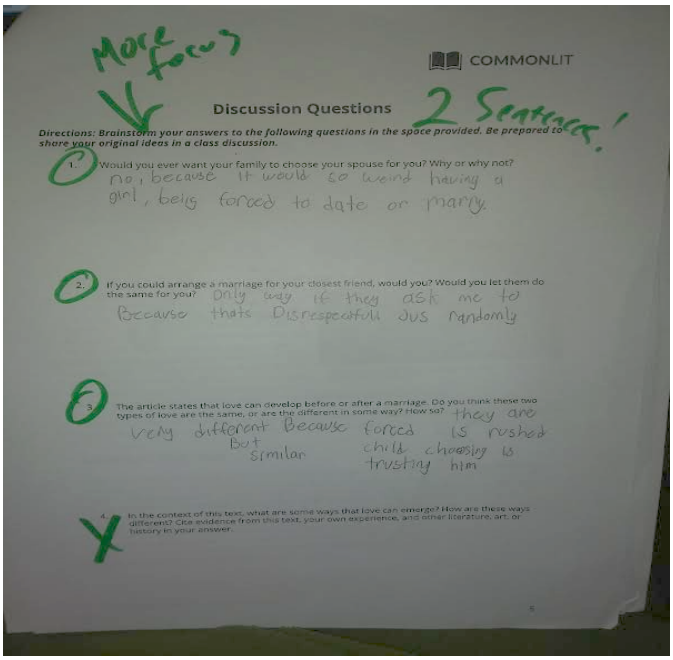
School Writing. Bobby said that he used writing to answer questions and to take notes in classes other than language arts. In language arts, he wrote mainly to answer questions about his reading. Findings indicated that Bobby did a lot of writing in class, partially completing his assignments. He included his opinions and ideas, often using a bit of humor in his writing. His level of engagement during writing varied based on assignments and classroom contexts. Sometimes he struggled to understand what he was supposed to do and to remember what he had read.

Varied levels of writing engagement. Bobby had trouble getting started with writing or writing consistently at times. Observation notes indicate that he often walked

around the room, moved to sit with friends, stopped working to look over his shoulder at other classmates, or asked to leave the room for various reasons. When asked if he was finished with his work, he would often say that he was going to finish the task at home where there were fewer distractions. He said his biggest problem with writing was focus.

Mr. Martin commented, "Distracted is an understatement for Bobby" when I asked if he felt that focus was a problem. Teacher feedback on assignments sometimes indicated the need for more focus. For example, the written feedback on the assignment below includes the words "more focus" as well as a reminder that the students were told to write "two sentences" for each answer.

Figure 4.7 Bobby's Incomplete Response to Text.



This assignment was a response to a story about arranged marriages that the class read together. As they read, Mr. Martin modeled annotating the story. Bobby followed

along, underlining sections of the story, putting asterisks beside areas that he thought was important, and defining the word "spouse" by writing "life partner" next to it. Throughout the reading, Mr. Martin stopped and asked questions to help the students understand the meaning of what they were reading.

I was surprised during the reading and the discussion that students were not more outspoken in their opposition to arranged marriages. They simply listened to the reading while following Mr. Martin's guide to annotate the story, making very little comment. Finally, at the end of the discussion, I noticed one student laugh when Mr. Martin asked a student if he would be okay with his parents picking out a girl for him to marry. The class as a whole just did not seem to relate to this reading. After reading, Mr. Martin told students to answer the four discussion questions, that they could work with other students at their table and would have 15 minutes to complete the questions.

Bobby worked alone during this time and although he did some writing to answer three of the four questions, he did not receive full credit for any of the questions that he answered. I monitored Bobby and noticed that he did not begin writing until the teacher came by his seat and helped him begin. Although he was sitting alone, he would often turn around and talk to a group at a table behind him or he would get up and wander around the room.

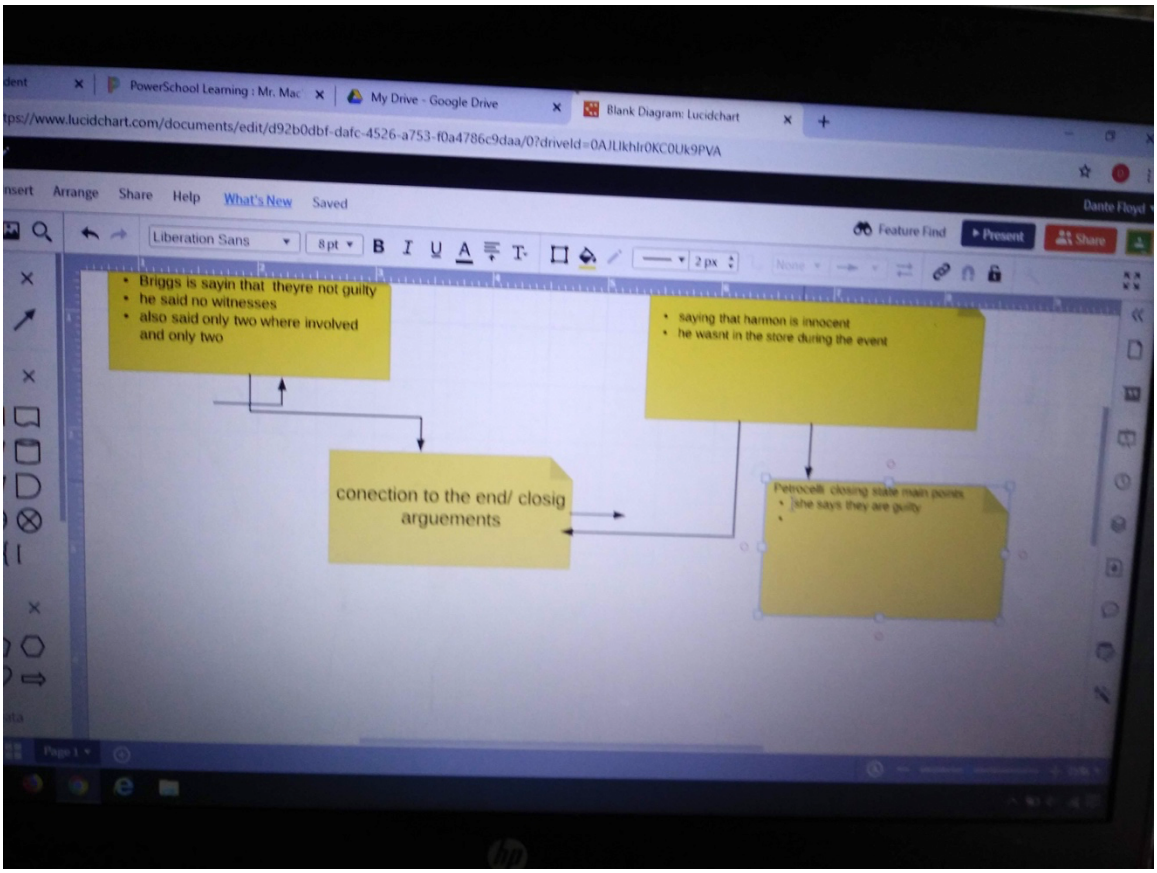
In spite of moments of distraction and trouble getting started, he finally responded with plausible answers although they were incomplete. For example, in question two he answered the first part of the question, "If you could arrange a marriage for your closet friend, would you?" But he did not answer the second part of the question, "Would you

let them do the same for you?" The third question was about whether or not love can develop after a marriage. Bobby answered by talking about the lack of personal choice in arranged marriages, which did not really answer the question asked.

Whereas this assignment did not seem to engage Bobby, he was able to at least partially complete it. During other observations, there were times that Bobby worked more steadily throughout the time allotted. This happened both while writing on his own and with peers. However, even with consistent effort, he usually did not complete the task in the given amount of time.

For example, one day Mr. Martin told the students that they would need to finish the assigned task before the end of class in order to receive a grade. In this assignment, they were to create a diagram using Lucid Charts, a component of Google that utilizes graphic organizers, by responding to a question about the chapter they had just completed reading as a class. Near the beginning of the independent work time, I stopped by Bobby's desk and asked if he needed help. He asked me to explain the instructions again. Once he understood the instructions, he worked consistently for the rest of the class time, approximately 30 minutes. At one point, I noted that he was holding the book with one hand and typing with the other. Other times, he flipped through the book looking for arguments from the chapter. At the end of the work time, his completed project consisted of three boxes in the graphic organizer containing two to three bulleted points each. Bobby did not finish the last task, which was to compare and contrast the arguments.

Figure 4.8 Bobby's Lucid Chart



At the end of the class period, Bobby said he was disappointed that he did not finish his work. The tasks of coming to an understanding of the instructions, finding the information needed from the reading, and putting the ideas together in bullet points took a long time for Bobby to accomplish. While he was not able to complete all of the assignment, his work showed that he had the ability to go through this process and consolidate the information about each of the prosecutors' arguments using his own words. In this case, his struggle may not have been his writing ability but simply the time it took to complete the complicated process.

Bobby sometimes worked well within a group. For example, in preparation for reading *Monster*, students were given a variety of scenarios to read in which someone had been found guilty of a crime. The students were then asked to discuss the appropriate punishment for the crimes with their table group and to write their individual decisions for each crime along with the reasoning for their decision. A review of the work showed that Bobby finished almost all of this assignment during the allotted class time and the reasoning seemed to be sufficient. It is possible that the collaboration and discussion helped him to develop his reasoning and complete this work.

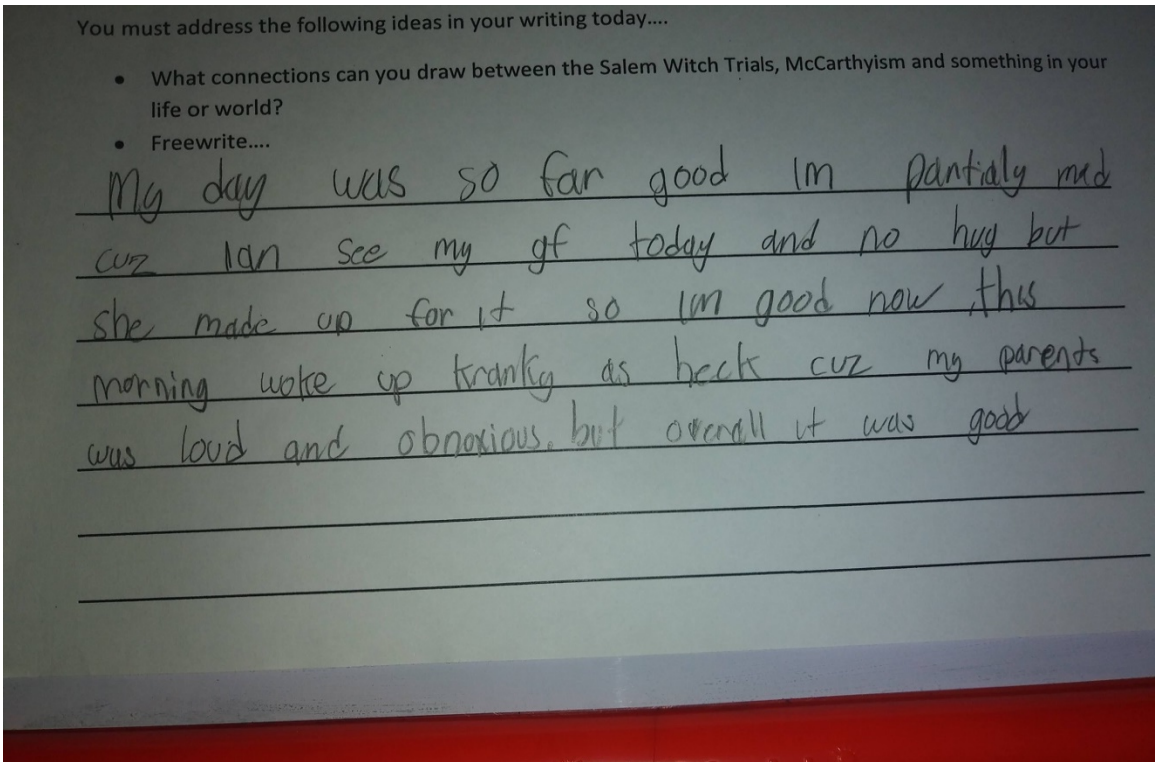
These examples, along with other observations, indicated that Bobby experienced sustained writing at school under certain conditions. However, in some cases, he was distracted easily and preferred to complete more work at home. He seemed to benefit from both group and independent writing and from teacher intervention, especially while getting started with his writing.

Writing with expression and meaning. Throughout the research period, Bobby consistently said that he liked to share his ideas in his writing or to express himself. Writing "gives me a chance to speak my mind," he said. Earlier, I discussed the two autobiographical stories Bobby wrote at home and shared with his teacher and me, for example. He also had opportunities for self-expression through the “bell work” assignments. His narrative responses to these short writing prompts demonstrated how he used writing experiences for self-expression. This writing moved from expressive and interested when writing about personal ideas, to limited when replying to a prompt

intended to evaluate his understanding of reading. These experiences were a manifestation of Bobby's desire to share his ideas or to be heard through his writing.

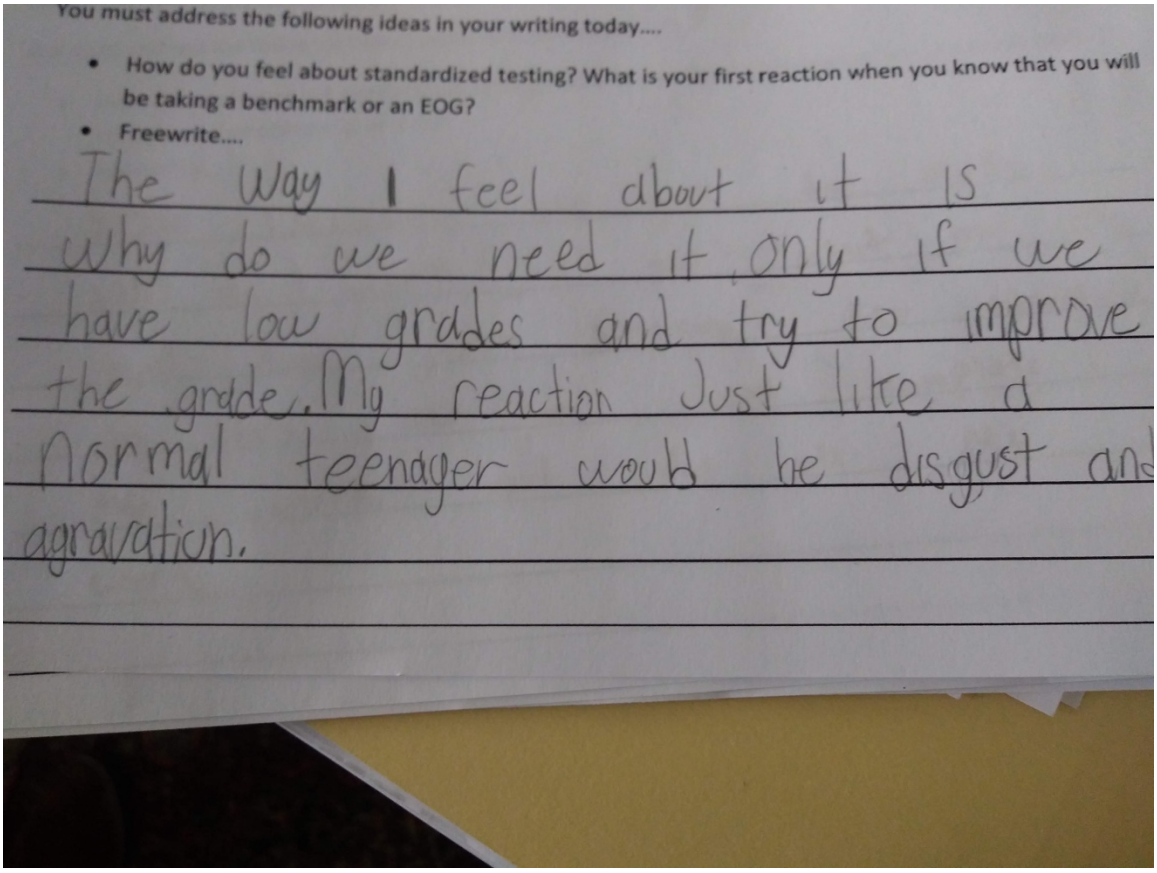
In Figure 4.9, Bobby used the “bell work” writing prompt to share information about his day. Bobby's voice came through such phrases as "kranky as heck [*sic*]" and the description of his parents as "loud and obnoxious." Through this piece, the reader gets a good idea of how Bobby's morning unfolded. It is possible that Bobby wrote this piece both in an effort to share his feelings with his teacher as well as a therapeutic way to process his feelings.

Figure 4.9 Bobby's Free Writing



Again, in the following piece (Figure 4.10), Bobby's writing voice is highlighted. He expressed his opinion with his word choice of disgust and aggravation and floundered in the effort to explain why he did not think he needed the EOGs. It seemed that his focus was more on the need to express his feelings than to explain his reasoning.

Figure 4.10 Bobby's Response to EOGs.

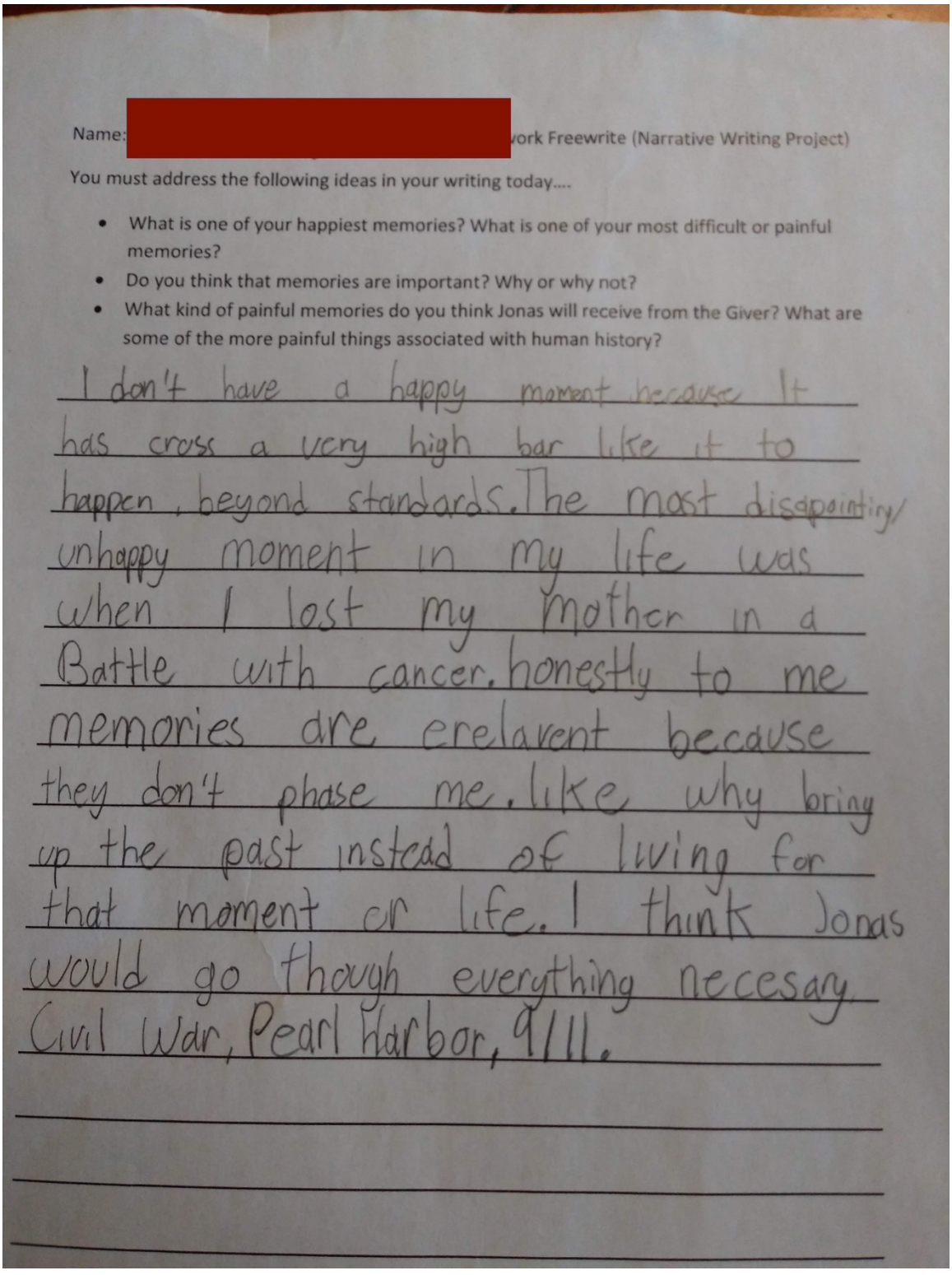


In the two examples above, Bobby answered a prompt asking for his opinion. In the example below, however, he was asked to tell about meaningful memories and to answer specific questions about his reading. Bobby again utilized this writing opportunity to share strong emotions. As he shared the difficult memory of losing his

mother to cancer, he attempted to put into words how this event has affected his feelings about memories. In contrast to his attempt to elaborate about his memories and feelings about memories, his response to the question about his reading was short and to the point.

These writing samples showed that Bobby frequently uses writing as a form of self-expression and does so using his unique voice, which makes his writing distinctive. Using the word "honestly" and asking questions in the middle of the paper worked for him as ways to make the piece sound conversational. Sharing the highly personal story about losing his mother and explaining why he focuses on the present was highly descriptive of his inner thinking. This leaves the reader wanting to know more. However, when it comes to writing about reading, he struggled with completion of ideas. In the next section, I look more closely at his writing in response to reading or to answer questions.

Figure 4.11 Bobby's Writing About Memories



Name: [redacted] ork Freewrite (Narrative Writing Project)

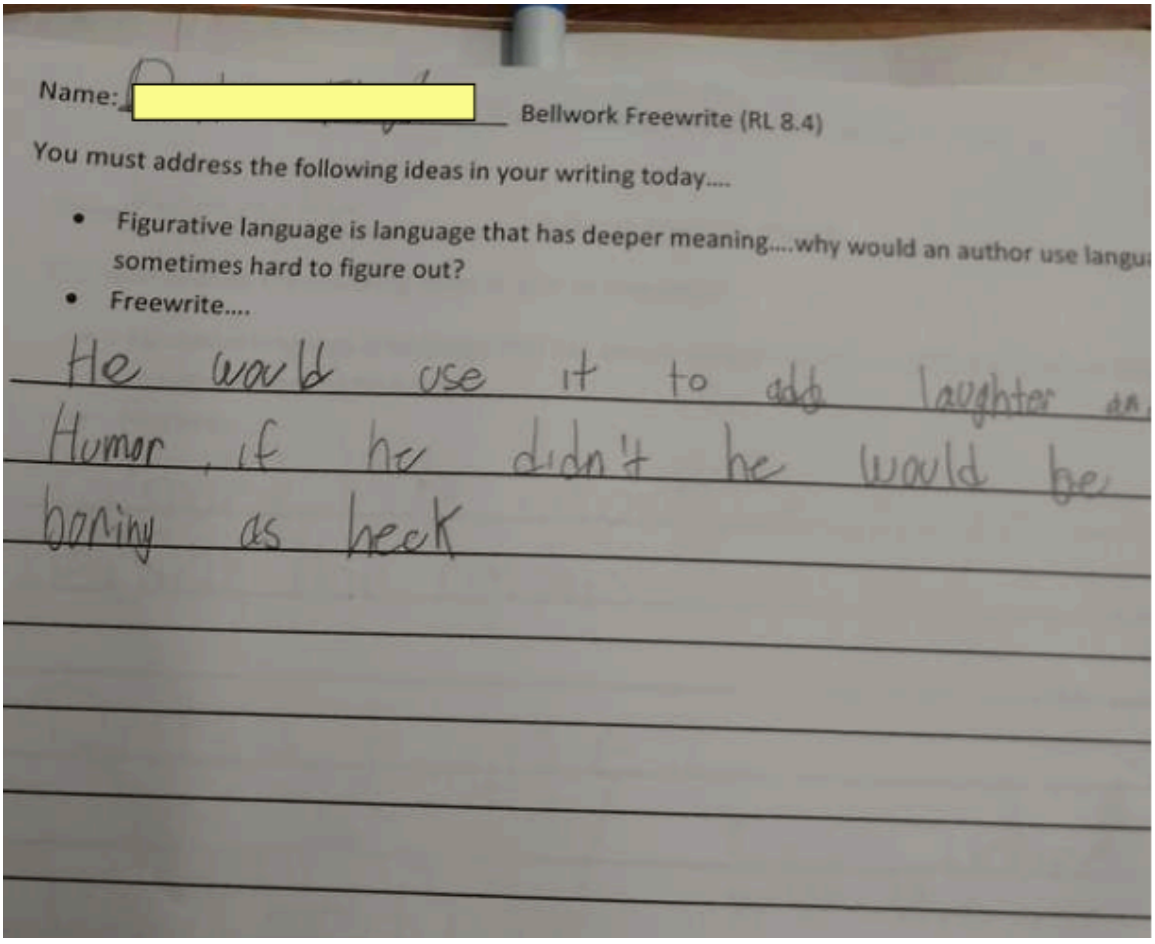
You must address the following ideas in your writing today....

- What is one of your happiest memories? What is one of your most difficult or painful memories?
- Do you think that memories are important? Why or why not?
- What kind of painful memories do you think Jonas will receive from the Giver? What are some of the more painful things associated with human history?

I don't have a happy moment because It has cross a very high bar like it to happen, beyond standards. The most disapointing/ unhappy moment in my life was when I lost my mother in a Battle with cancer. honestly to me memories are erelavent because they don't phase me. like why bring up the past instead of living for that moment or life. I think Jonas would go thoygh everything necesary Civil War, Pearl Harbor, 9/11.

Difficulty remembering details. When Bobby wrote to complete an assignment designed to assess understanding of a particular concept or something that he had read, his writing was strikingly different from when he wrote about himself. Below, the response to a prompt designed to assess student understanding of figurative language, is short and to the point.

Figure 4.12 Bobby's Figurative Language Explanation

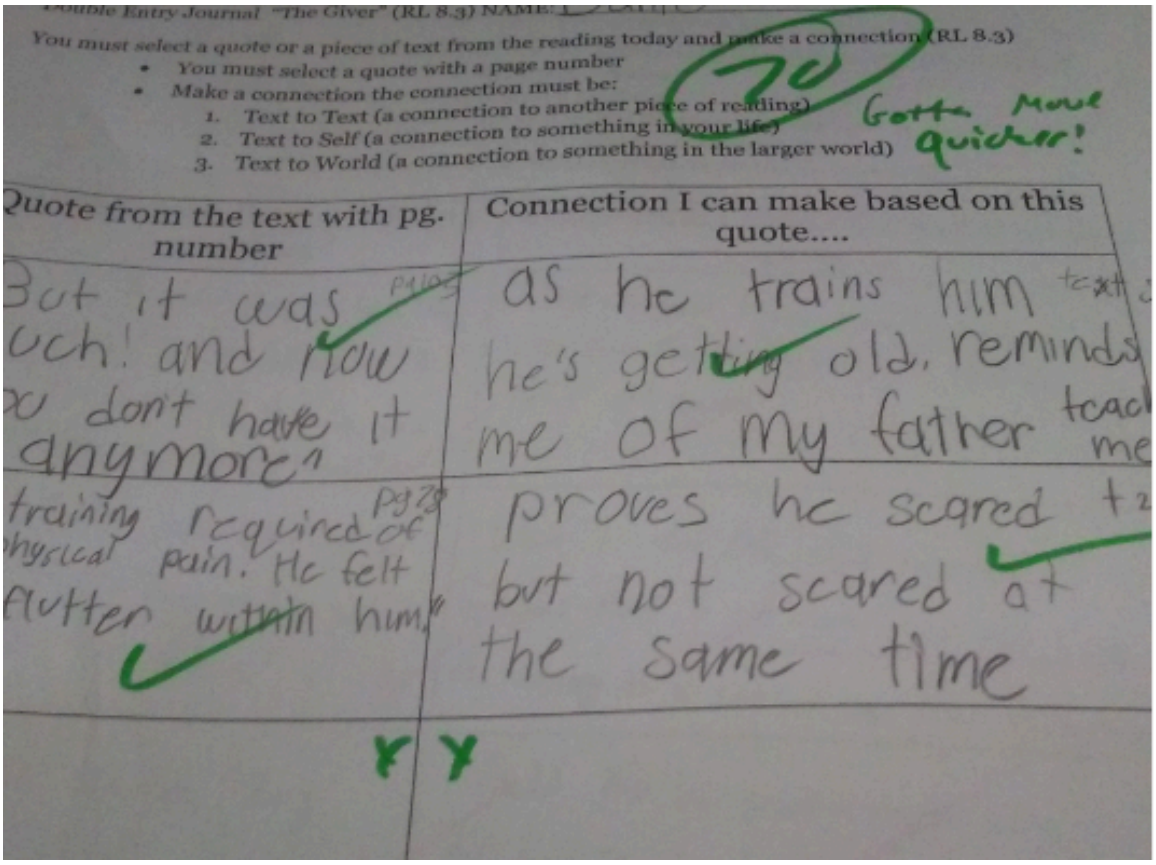


During an interview, Bobby told me that he liked to read books that he is interested in, but that he did not always like to write about what he is reading. "I hate it when you freshly…you are done reading a book …and you just jump into writing, I hate that."

Reviewing his writing assignments helped to understand the reasoning for Bobby's dislike of writing about reading. In a double journal, students were often required to choose a specific quote from a text that they were reading and to make connections or answer questions about that text. This two-part assignment was often too much for Bobby to complete. In the double journal assignment below, Bobby worked the entire class period but did not complete the assignment. In the comments, the teacher told him that he needed to work faster.

I observed Bobby closely during this assignment and noticed that he quickly found the first quotation and wrote it in the box, but he did not understand how to make a connection based on the quote. He took several minutes to come up with something to write and decided that the personal connection was that the quote reminded him of when his father taught him, however, he did not explain how this reminded him of his father. It took him a long time to choose the second quote. He explained the second quotation but did not make a connection as instructed. His frustration with this type of assignment was clear, as he did not seem to know what to do and was not able to finish the work.

Figure 4.13 Bobby's Double Journal Entry



Double Entry Journal "The Giver" (RL 8.3) NAME:

You must select a quote or a piece of text from the reading today and make a connection (RL 8.3)

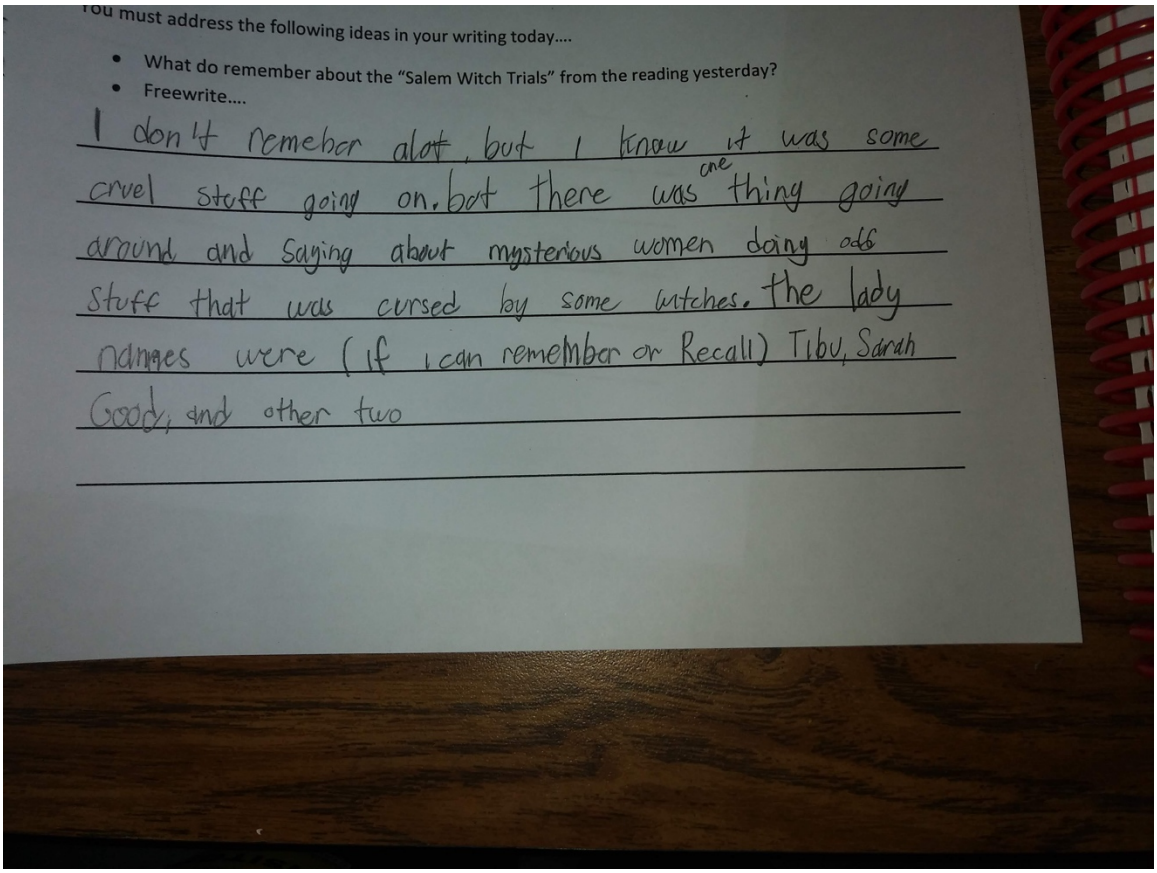
- You must select a quote with a page number
- Make a connection the connection must be:
  1. Text to Text (a connection to another piece of reading)
  2. Text to Self (a connection to something in your life)
  3. Text to World (a connection to something in the larger world)

Gotta move quicker!

Quote from the text with pg. number	Connection I can make based on this quote....
But it was ouch! and now you don't have it anymore"	as he trains him he's getting old. reminds me of my father
training required of physical pain. He felt flutter within him.	proves he scared but not scared at the same time

Figure 4.14 is another example of Bobby's writing about reading, but in this case, he was asked to remember something he had read the day before.

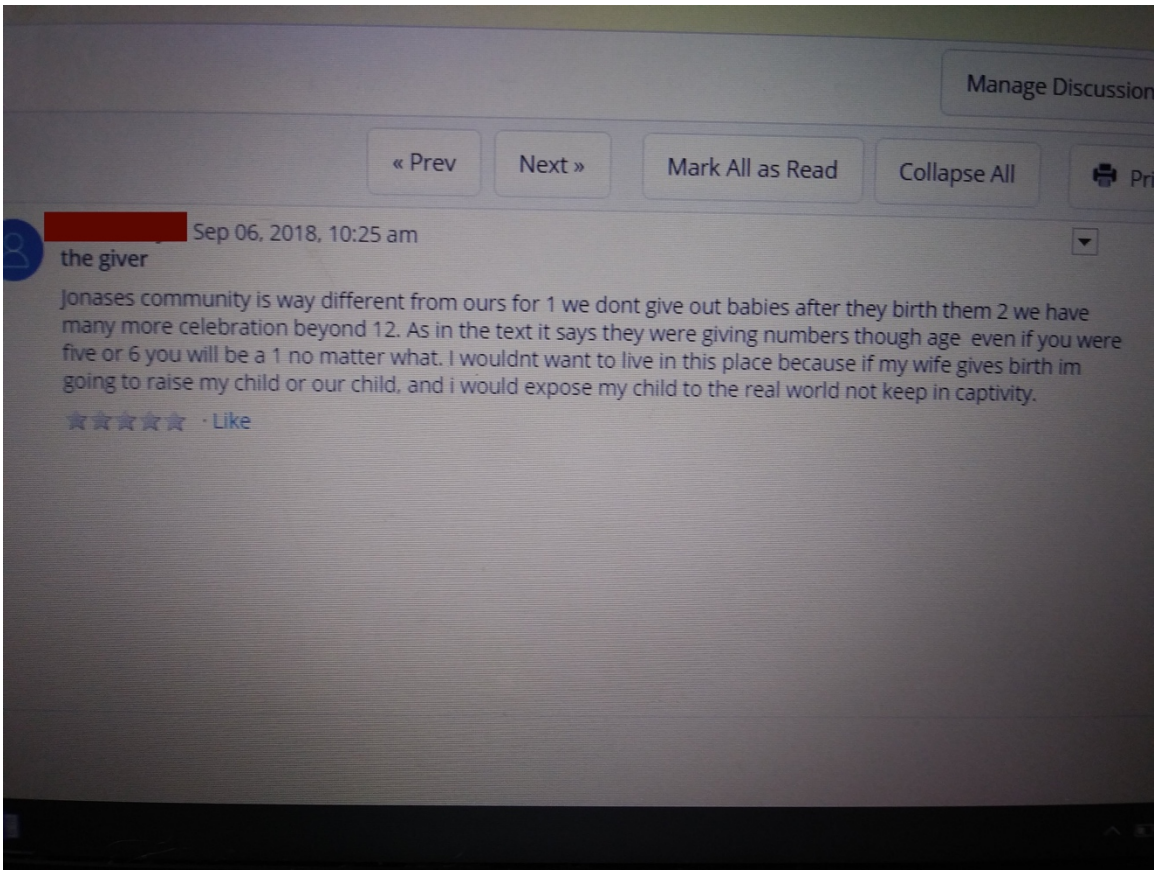
Figure 4.14 Bobby's Description of Salem Witch Trials



It seems that Bobby understood that basic idea of the reading about the Salem Witch Trials from the previous day. However, he did not remember many details, which he felt he needed to know in order to complete the assignment and actually said in his writing that he did not remember. He tried to remember the names of the people accused of being witches but was vague about what they were doing to earn this accusation.

While writing about reading using both traditional and digital tools was difficult for Bobby, his digital bulletin board entries were generally completer and more detailed. The use of the digital bulletin board provided a writing experience that included an audience and a chance to get feedback. Below, Bobby used the discussion board to explain the difference between his own community and the community described in *The Giver.*

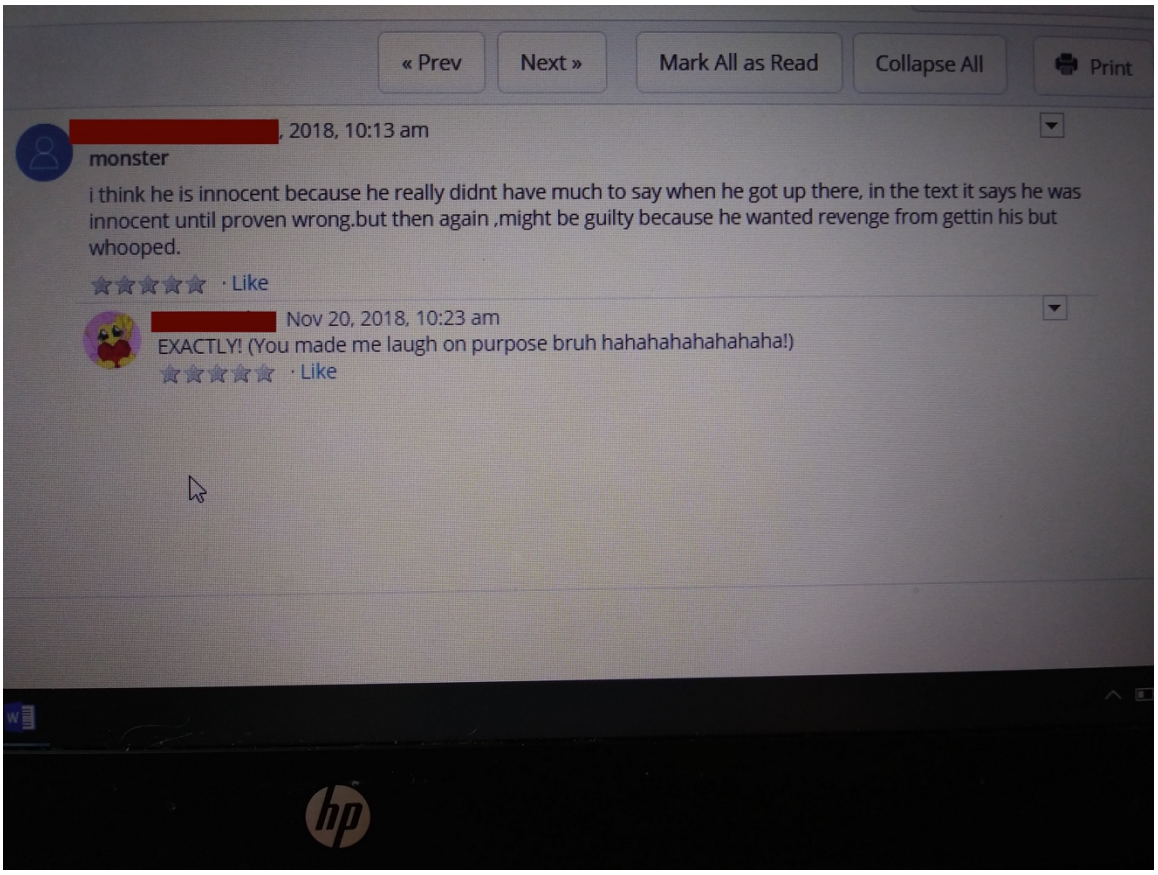
Figure 4.15 Bobby's Digital Bulletin Board Response to *The Giver*



In this writing, Bobby was able to explain several differences between the communities (i.e. we don't give our babies away after birth, we continue to celebrate after age 12, and we don't number our children based on birth). He also made a personal connection indicating that he would not want to raise his child in such a community.

In another digital bulletin board response, Bobby attempted to tell why he thought the character from the book *Monster* was not guilty.

Figure 4.16 Bobby's Digital Bulletin Board Response to *Monster*



Struggling a bit here with his reasoning, Bobby did not seem to recall enough details to effectively support his ideas. Instead, he resorted to adding a little bit of humor. "He wanted revenge from getting his but [sic] whooped." Though this does not really make sense in the terms of the story, it earned Bobby a positive response from one of his classmates.

In summary, Bobby worked to complete his assignments but sometimes struggled with engagement at school. He wrote more prolifically and more interestingly when he was able to share his own ideas or opinions. He floundered through some of his writing assignments when they required responses to reading including details or reading that he did before that day. Sometimes he could not complete the assignments. Using the digital bulletin board sometimes resulted in writing that was more complete, which rewarded him with positive responses from classmates. When given attention and audience, he would write more, especially if allowed to write about a topic of his own choosing.

Bobby's writing experiences were varied in the topics he wrote about, his ability to complete writing assignments, and the amount of sustained writing he did. Writing for self-expression was very important to him and he definitely was affected by attention from adults and peers. His ability to write and his experiences clearly shaped his writing perceptions, which I discuss in the following section.

Bobby's Writing Perceptions

Throughout the research study, Bobby stated that he liked to write and that he thought he was a good writer. In general, he was not able to give a clear definition of writing or explain how it might be used beyond educational purposes. His definitions of

writing and his understanding of quality writing seemed to shift throughout our discussions. In this section, I explore Bobby's writing perceptions, beginning with his definition of writing, and moving to his beliefs about what makes writing good and his own writing ability.

What is writing?

Definition and tools. When I asked Bobby to define writing, he attempted to find words to describe the concept, "Writing can be anything, I mean, it depends on what you write a about…writing is just writing…what you think and/on a piece of paper."

He said that the tools used for writing would be "a pencil, your hands and of course my brain." I asked if writing could include using the computer. He readily agreed that it could be a "computer or a phone, anything used for research."

Throughout the research period, Bobby's description of writing became both clearer and more focused on the idea that writing involves thinking and expression. Words he used at different times to describe writing included:

- Imagination
- A piece of knowledge or a piece of what you are thinking.
- Writing is a conversation
- Writing is expressing ideas

Bobby's description of writing was congruent with the findings that much of his writing was about himself and his feelings. When asked about tools, his tendency was to think of writing as putting text on paper, but with prompting quickly agreed that digital tools could be used to write. As will be described later, he indicated that using the digital

bulletin board helped him write because it allowed him to have deeper conversations with other people. He understood writing as a way to communicate, to express ideas, and considered thinking a part of the writing process.

Purpose. Throughout our conversations, Bobby indicated that he liked writing when he could express himself and that it could be somewhat therapeutic. For example, when I asked him why he liked writing about himself he said, "It's fun. To see what you've been through. To see what you have done but sometimes be hard."

Because of these conversations, I expected Bobby to talk about the therapeutic aspect of writing when I asked what the purpose of writing was and why it was important. Instead, he seemed to have trouble defining exactly why it was important: "I think cause you need writing in life. How are you going to write a check if you can't write? Just writing period, it doesn't gotta to be a check, gotta be... just writing a letter…. anything."

However, when I asked about writing on social media, he said he used it to "keep up with the world, with celebrities, and with drama." He said that some people used social media for "clout" which is defined by the urban dictionary as "political or community power"(Urban dictionary, 2019). He went on to tell me that he did not use social media for this reason, but others did and "to post their feelings and things."

What makes writing good? Regardless of how he defined writing, Bobby thought that he was a good writer, although he was not sure why he thought this. "I don't know…I just think I am a good writer," he said when I asked. Later, I asked him to rate his writing from 1-10 (10 being the best), he answered immediately, "1000." Yet when I

asked him to choose his best piece of writing and tell me why it was the best, he could not tell me why he chose the piece he did. To follow up with that question, I asked him to tell me what made good writing. He explained, "Good writing has... all the good points. Specific stuff that the writers are looking for. Bad writing is just flat out going off topic and not caring. About making it sloppy [*sic*]."

Bobby went on to tell me that good writing has details, is funny, and includes figurative language such as similes and metaphors. Therefore, it is not plain, stays on topic, and includes paragraphs and indenting. His use of this specific terminology—figurative language, similes and metaphors—was not surprising because the class had recently spent several days talking about how to use these elements in writing. Paragraphs, indenting, and staying on topic are generally areas that teachers often talk to students about. It seems that Bobby had a distinct view of what makes writing good based on his school experiences. He also understood that writing should be interesting. For example, I asked Bobby if it was hard to write about the poem *Story of an Hour* because he had mentioned that it was a difficult poem to read. In the following quote, he seems to say that interest and intensity of the poem helped make writing about it easier

> Not really, once you had the interest…I feel like you won't lose the interest until you find another deep, another…. what am I trying to use, another until you find another deep piece of information that will lead you to suspense. I think you won't lose that interest.

Bobby felt that writing was something that he was good at and that having an interest in writing helps him be a better writer. He had clear idea of what he thought made good writing, based on school experiences, but explaining how his writing met

these criteria was harder for him. While his perception of his writing ability may be somewhat inflated, at least compared to school standards, he did appear to understand what makes writing difficult for him. He said, "Definitely comprehending from reading another story at least within the next two days." This goes along with his statements about not always liking to write about what he had read, and that writing is easier if it is about something in which he is interested.

Overall, Bobby seemed to understand writing as both a way to complete his schoolwork and as a way to express himself. He understood writing as a creative process that included thinking and using one's imagination. He also thought he was a good writer. How writing is used in a career as an adult was not clear to Bobby. He understood there were various elements that make writing good and that writing took effort and care. This idea is further discussed in the following section.

What Helps and Hinders Bobby's Writing?

Bobby thought that he was a good writer, but he did not have a very clear picture of what made him a good writer or about factors that helped him improve his writing. He mentioned his own efforts, and, when asked how his teacher could help, contextual factors (e.g., types of assignments, tools). His effort and interest in writing seemed to improve in some ways as the study progressed and data indicate that being a research participant may have affected his writing process in a positive way. Next, I describe factors that affected Bobby's writing.

Self. When asked what could make his writing better, Bobby quickly said, "Focus." When asked about writing when he was younger (explained earlier in this

study), he mentioned difficulty with focusing and that he said that he sometimes takes assignments home where there are "less distractions." Observations corroborated this lack of focus as Bobby moved around a lot in class and talked or laughed with peers, often not finishing his assignments. However, as described previously, when given clear boundaries and a clear deadline or when working on a project with peers, there were examples of Bobby being able to work steadily for a sustained period. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Bobby's first and most prevalent comment about how to improve his writing was "Focus." He was not, however, able to explain how he could focus more, except to take his work home.

Teachers. Because I wanted to know more about what he thought others could do to help him write, I specifically asked, "What about your teachers, what is something a teacher has done to help you write and or what do you wish a teacher would do?" Bobby said that the teacher could give examples and explain the assignment. This is not surprising that he mentioned the importance of teachers explaining the assignment given the evidence that he struggled with understanding instructions and was sometimes slowed down at the beginning of an assignment because he did not know what to do. He mentioned too that he liked doing annotations—an activity comprised of the teacher explicitly modeling taking notes as students copy these notes on their own papers.

Bobby also said that teachers could help by letting the students use computers and have less handwriting. Lastly, he said, that he preferred to write less about reading. He went on, as described previously, to explain how he hated to have to write about reading right after he has just finished reading a book. These answers are congruent with the idea

that Bobby struggled with writing because of his struggle with remembering or understanding his reading.

Mr. Martin believed that more confidence would help Bobby improve his work. He described an interaction with Bobby during am EOG benchmark preparation session when Bobby asked for help, saying he did not know what to do. At this point, Mr. Martin read the question very slowly and clearly and without any other explanation or help, Bobby was able to complete the test. The teacher thought that this showed Bobby was not confident and needed more confidence in himself.

Peers. Bobby said that working with his peers sometimes helped him. He felt strongly that he should be able to talk to his peers most of the time. Observation notes showed that he was definitely affected by classmates. He would often turn his head to look at another student to see whether they were looking when he made a comment in class and sometimes when working would talk across the classroom to students. Often, when helping to pass out papers or laptops, Bobby would stop to talk to students, often taking longer to get back to his seat than he should have. Mr. Martin mentioned the importance of giving Bobby the freedom to walk around the room, calling Bobby "a wanderer." While Mr. Martin often allows students to choose who they sat with, he would often move Bobby away from a particular peer that he felt distracted him.

As mentioned earlier, Bobby experienced peer interactions during writing and sometimes group work. In the example of the “You Be the Judge” assignment, peer interaction and discussion took place before the students wrote their own decisions. A review of this assignment shows an almost complete paper and well-reasoned judgments

by Bobby. Because this paper was so dramatically different than others written by Bobby, it is reasonable to believe that the collaboration and discussion helped him complete this work.

Conclusion

In general, whether help comes from teachers or peers, it appears that help in understanding the assignment and getting started was a key way to assist Bobby in writing. An environment in which he could move around and was allowed to use computers was important as well. Sustained time and structure as demonstrated in the earlier discussion were important. Possibly, the biggest factors that promoted writing for Bobby however was the ability to write about himself, encouragement from adults, and positive feedback.

As Bobby said in his writing, the things he had been through made him strong. Bobby used his writing to share and process life events. His writing was humorous, descriptive, and poignant. He had vague ideas about how writing was used, but definitely thought that it was important. His understanding of what makes writing good was strongly affected by his school experiences. He thought of himself as a good writer and given the appropriate circumstances applied himself to his writing with positive results.

Roy

Roy, age 13, is a Black boy who described himself as a visual person and a poet. He lived part time with his mother and part time with his father and had five siblings. For fun, he played basketball in his neighborhood, but he said that his time to play was limited due to problems with the neighbors, and therefore, he often stayed home where he

liked to draw. He said he would like to be a medical doctor, but first he planned to get a job and make money to pay for college.

Mr. Martin described Roy as relatively centered, self-aware, and self-reflective. Though he did not often express ideas in class, he would sometimes share personal ideas about issues individually or in small groups such as having to wear uniforms at school. Some of his writing mentioned prejudice, racial problems, and personal issues. In interviews with me and during individual conversations with his teacher, Roy described himself as weird and dark and said he writes about dark issues like death and sadness. In spite of this self-characterization, Mr. Martin said he had not seen signs of this in Roy's behavior or writing.

Mr. Martin described Roy's grades in language arts as "acceptable" because he followed directions and did his work, but test scores indicated low skill levels. Observations in class indicated that he worked on his assignments but did not always finish them. He usually sat with a group of four boys that included Ski from this study. He participated in class occasionally answering questions, but also talked quietly to his friends or laughed. He often doodled or drew during class. Most days that I observed Roy worked on classwork and accepted help when offered. There were a few instances however when he did not want help, spent his time drawing, and refused to acknowledge Mrs. Rigby, the special education teacher, when she offered help. During class discussions, Roy often participated by answering one or two questions. More often, he would look at his seatmates and make quiet comments.

Roy's Writing Experiences

Home and early literacy practices.

Writing poetry at home. Roy self-identified as a poet and said that he wrote poems about himself when he was in a dark mood or sad. He told me that he had written poems in the style of Edgar Allen Poe, but did not share them with me. He said he did not usually share these poems with anyone or try to publish them. When asked about other writing he might do at home, he said that he usually drew rather than wrote if given a choice.

Social media and gaming. Roy stated that his family had a website but did not mention seeing his parents write or read. His sister, however, liked to read and write, "Even when she is not bored," Roy told me. Roy said he used Instagram, texting, and Facebook at home. He mainly texted with family, but posted on Instagram to talk about video games, his favorite characters, and cartoons. I asked him to describe a typical post that he might make, and he described posting about a video game.

> I'm like a video game person. About this new game Mortal Combat 11 - it just came out. I posted out that in my opinion about this game is probably gonna be like the next generation of Mortal Combat X.

Roy went on to explain that his friend commented on his post, agreeing with him that this was going to be an important game. He then told me that he did not rely on the Internet to make decisions about games that he would buy. Rather, he would go to the store and read about the game on packaging to help decide if he wanted to buy the game. Later, we talked about the video games themselves. I asked if he thought the games were

educational. At first, he said, "Not really." But when I asked if the games took skill or strategy, he said that they did.

> I play games that has to do with skills, also like an arcade game. Like *Call of Duty,* that is a skill game. Every game has to have a skill and a plan, and you have to be smart at it [*sic*].

Roy went on to explain that sometimes he communicated with other players by typing messages, but that this only happened sometimes and was related to the type of game he was playing. This conversation indicated that Roy incorporated literary skills as part of his gaming and Internet activities. In order to play the game with his friends, he practiced collaboration while communicating both orally and through text, all of which are literacy skills needed in a 21st century environments (Kinzer, 2010).

Roy's description of home literacy practices incorporated an understanding of writing as a meaningful way to express feelings and to communicate with friends. He also indicated that he uses the Internet to learn about games but recognized the need for alternative sources of information. He seems to understand that successful gaming takes skill as well as planning, but he stopped short of categorizing the games as educational. While he used writing on social media to interact with others, his poetry was a private endeavor used to process emotions.

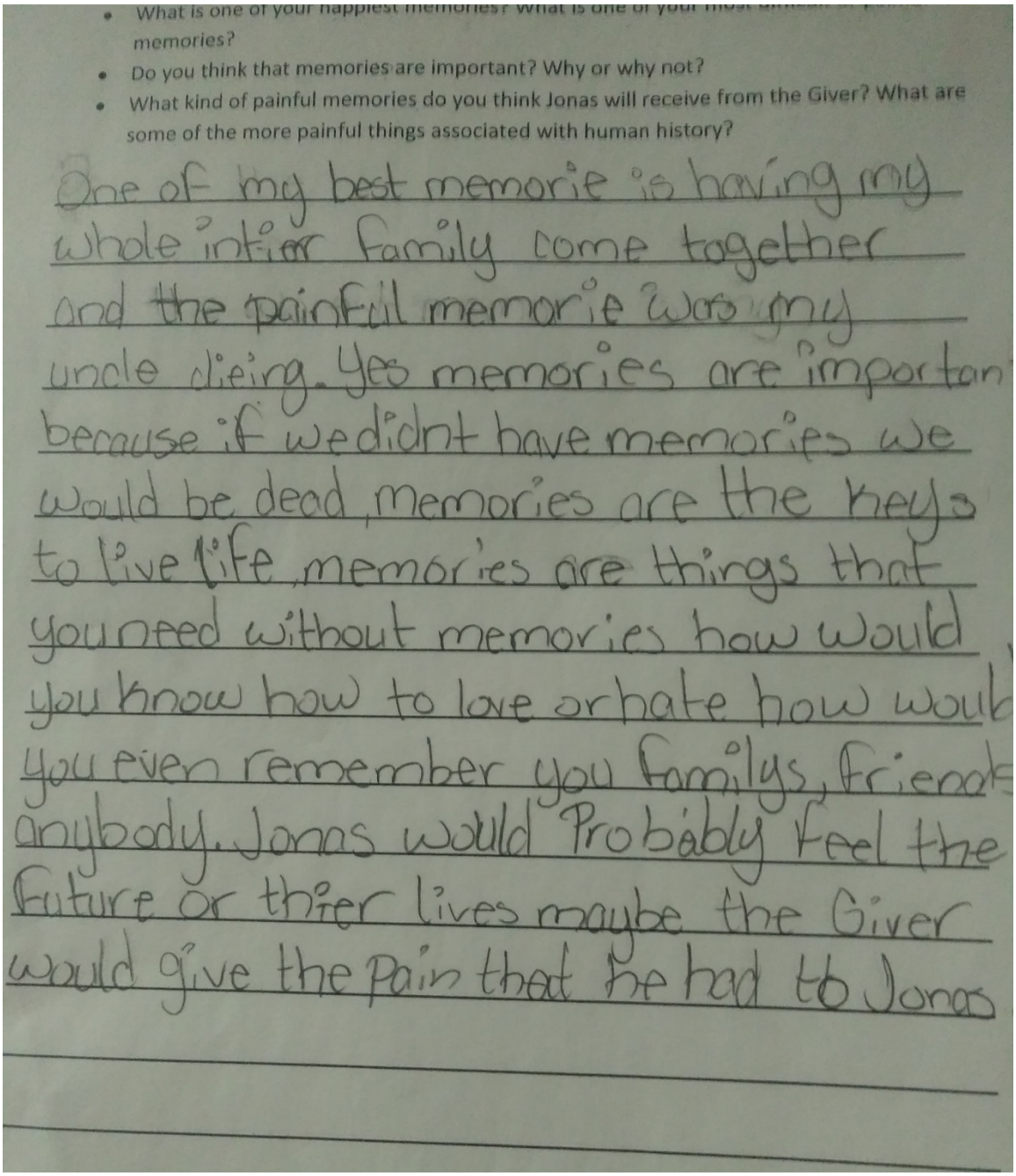
School writing.

Used narrative writing prompts to express ideas. Roy's “bell work” writing represented the most complete writing assignments from the artifacts collected. He often utilized his “bell work” entries to share his ideas and opinions; however, details were

sometimes limited. For example, he wrote that his most painful memory was his uncle dying and that his favorite memory was his family coming together, but he did not explain more about either of these memories.

Figure 4.17 shows how Roy worked to answer the questions asked and gave details for example about why memories are important. The detail that he used to answer the questions made it unlikely that he had time to expand on the painful and happy memories that he shared. The descriptions of these two memories, however, leave the reader wanting to hear more about his ideas. Roy seemed to have the potential to tell a story that we do not get to hear.

Figure 4.17 Roy's Writing About Memories

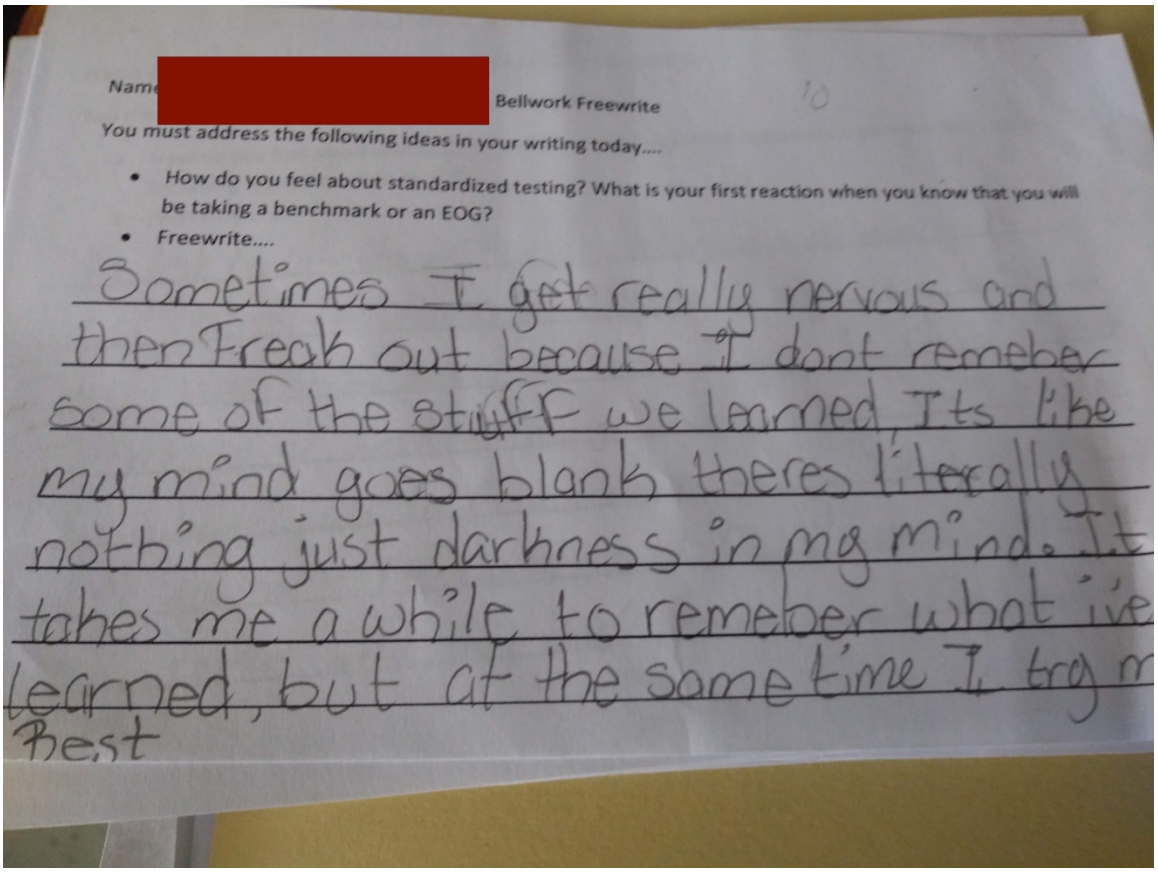


- What is one of your happiest memories? What is one of your most [illegible] memories?
- Do you think that memories are important? Why or why not?
- What kind of painful memories do you think Jonas will receive from the Giver? What are some of the more painful things associated with human history?

One of my best memorie is having my whole inter family come together and the painful memorie was my uncle dieing. Yes memories are importan because if we didnt have memories we would be dead, memories are the keys to live life, memories are things that you need without memories how would you know how to love or hate how woul you even remember you familys, friend anybody. Jonas would Probably feel the future or thier lives maybe the Giver would give the pain that he had to Jonas

In the next example (Figure 4.18), Roy wrote more about his feelings. Here he answered a question about benchmark testing giving the reader a clear understanding of the panic that he felt along with detailed descriptions.

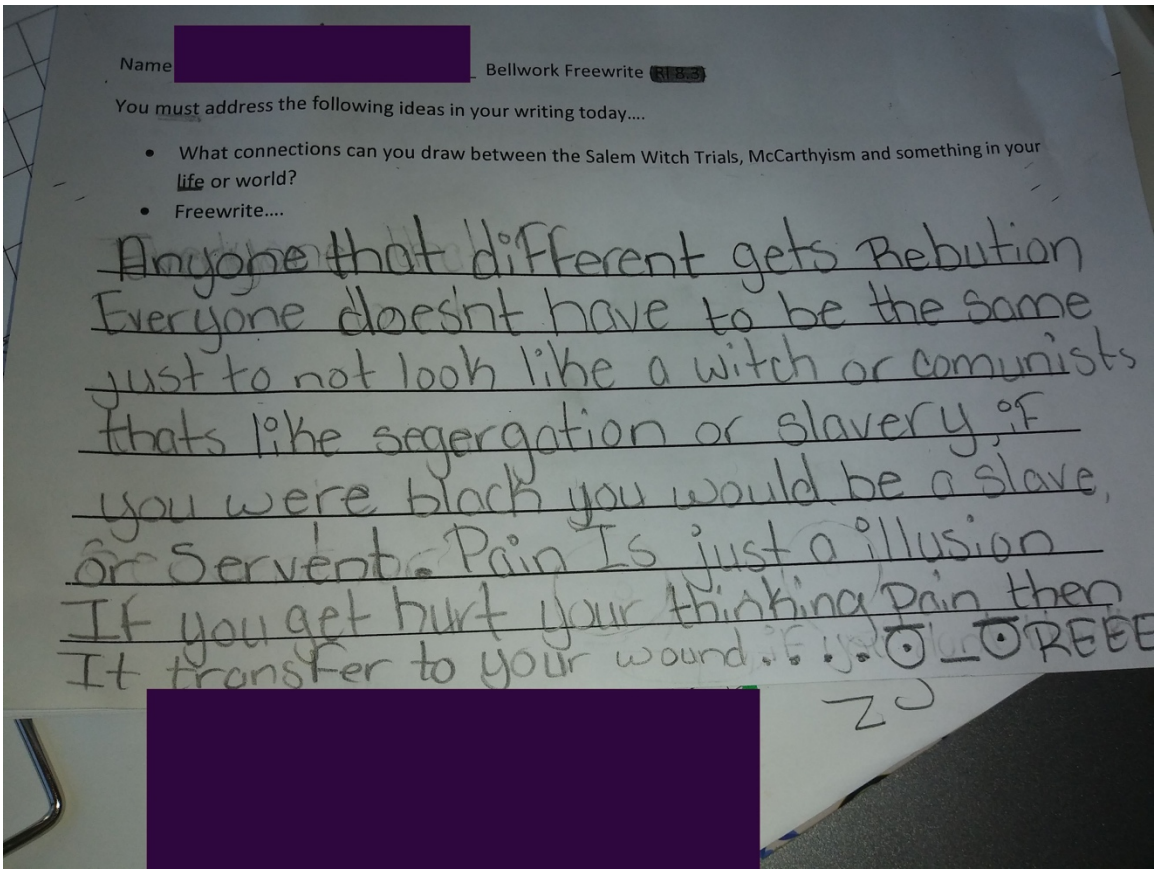
Figure 4.18 Roy's Response to EOGs



In this piece, his writing effectively described his emotions concerning benchmark testing. He used details to describe an image, "a blank mind with nothing but darkness," that helped the reader to understand his feelings. Roy finished with a description of how he would cope with his nervousness. In this short piece, Roy demonstrated an ability to convey a descriptive and meaningful emotion that he feels.

Combined home and school writing styles. Roy's bell work samples demonstrated a combination of home and school writing styles. He also bolstered his writing by using visual enhancements. For example, in the bell work below Roy is answering a question about the Salem Witch Trials. It appears as if Roy was trying to make a connection to the plight of Black Americans in the piece, but he struggled to complete the idea.

Figure 4.19 Example of Combining Home and School Writing Styles



Although he has difficulty spelling the word, I believe he meant to say that people who are different get "retribution," essentially saying that people who are different get discriminated against. He then stated his opinion that you should not have to be the same, indicating that in the time of the Salem Witch Trials, people who were different were more likely to be accused of being witches than those who conformed. He then tried to show how this phenomenon of being persecuted for being different also applied to Black people.

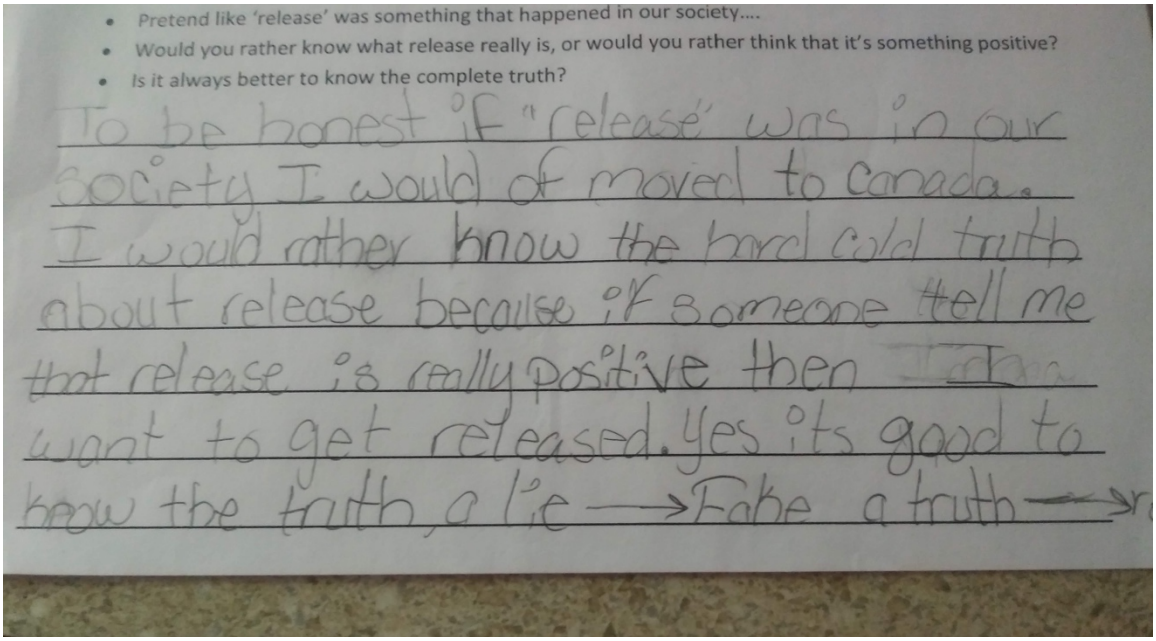
At the end of the piece, he switched from writing about the Salem Witch Trials to writing an expression "Pain is just an illusion," which possibly comes from a video game. He drew a surprised face and adds "REEE," a common expression used by gamers to denote a scream (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). When I asked Roy about this piece several weeks after he wrote it, he was not forthcoming about either his feelings about slavery or the reason that he wrote REEE and drew the picture at the bottom of the page. There is the possibility that he was less than comfortable talking to me, a White outside researcher, about slavery than he was writing about it. Alternatively, he could have been hesitant because he was not sure if it was permissible to include the image and the gaming expression in his school writing. Overall, however, Roy was able to explain his basic idea about the Salem Witch Trials and was learning to use a variety of techniques to better express his ideas.

Throughout his writing, Roy uses circles for dots on his I's, capital letters for emphasis, and arrows to help demonstrate specific points. In one case, he explains the acronym TBH using an arrow to point to the meaning, "to be honest." In one interview,

Roy explained to me that he used the arrow and the explanation because he realized that he was not texting and wanted to make sure the teacher understood his meaning.

In the following piece (Figure 4.20), Roy was writing to answer a question posed by his teacher about an event that occurred in *The Giver*, by Lois Lowery, that the class was reading together. In the book, when a person is executed, the leaders call it "release" and the people in the community do not completely understand that these people are being killed. Roy's answer is very logical, making it clear why people need to know the truth of what happens. At the end he uses arrows to emphasize the difference between what is fake and what is truth.

Figure 4.20 Use of Arrows in Text

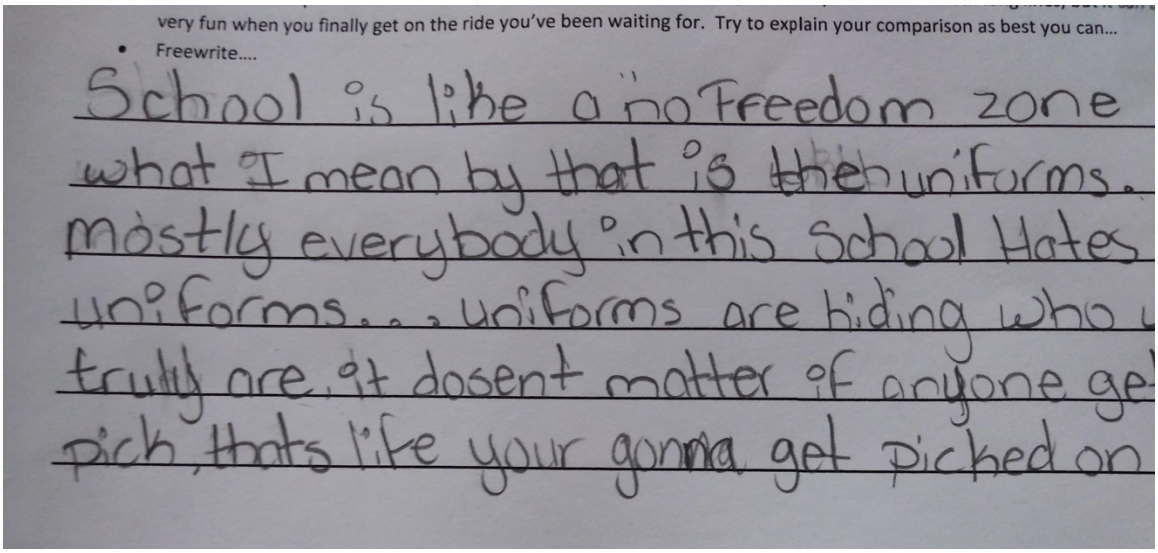


These examples demonstrate how Roy used home and school writing styles, along with visuals in his bell work writing. These techniques helped him complete ideas and made his writing more interesting.

In another assignment, a pre-reading worksheet designed to prepare the students for reading *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers, students were asked to mark certain statements as true or false and provide an explanation. Roy marked the statement "Racism and prejudice are not problems today in America" as false. His explanation was: "Ever seens Trump became President most white people treat Blacks like trash on certain…[*sic*]"

While Roy's thought was unfinished, it was clear that he was trying to use an example from current events to support his answer. The strong statement, "Most white people treat Blacks like trash," indicates emotion and an intense opinion. Other examples in Roy's writing, such as the mention of slavery in the piece about the Salem Witch Trials, hint that Roy had deep-seated feelings about the treatment of Black people in the United States, but he stopped short of elaborating and strongly supporting his opinion in his writing. It may be that in the classroom environment, situated within the school, that Roy did not feel safe or free to talk about racial issues. However, when asked to use an analogy to express an idea about opinions Roy chose to focus on the school's "standard mode of dress" (SMOD) policy.

Figure 4.21 Roy's School Analogy


very fun when you finally get on the ride you've been waiting for. Try to explain your comparison as best you can...

- Freewrite....

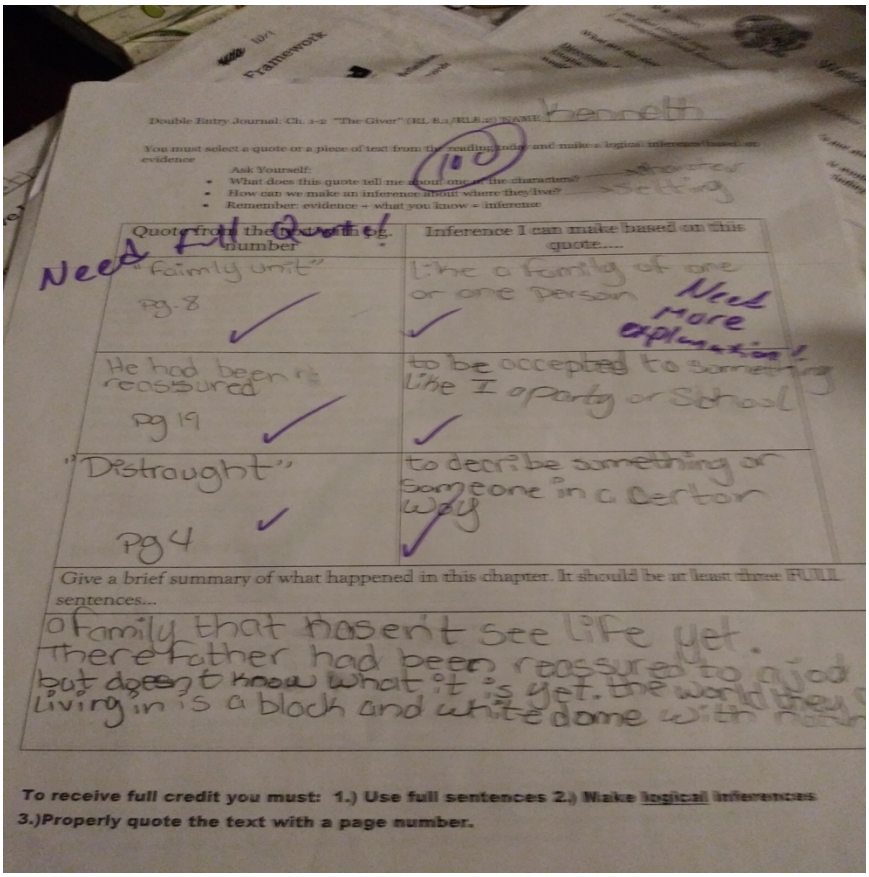
School is like a "no Freedom zone what I mean by that is the uniforms. mostly everybody in this School Hates uniforms. . . uniforms are hiding who truly are. it dosent matter if anyone ge pick, thats life your gonna get picked on

In this piece (Figure 4.21) and during the focus group interview, Roy spoke about his dislike of the uniform policy. He used the word "hate," once again indicating a strong emotion.

These "bell work" responses show that Roy could and did use writing to express his ideas. He has strong opinions that he shared through writing. Sometimes his ideas needed clarifying, and he used visuals to assist with the effort to show meaning. Often these responses left the reader wanting to know more. It seems he has a lot to say, but not enough time and space or perhaps the words to completely convey his ideas.

Struggles to complete reading assignments. When writing to respond to reading, Roy's writing experiences and products were very different. Often, assignments were not finished and there was little detail or elaboration.

Figure 4.22 Roy's Double Journal Entry



In Figure 4.22, Roy partially completed the direct task in the first column by finding a quote and copying it onto a worksheet. However, he did not share the complete quote and gave a definition in the second column instead of making an inference. Looking carefully at Roy's summary of the chapter reveals a shaky understanding of the text, as some of the information is erroneous. He wrote that the father in the story did not know what his job would be. This is not representative of the story, as the adults all had jobs; rather, it was the boy who was waiting to receive his job assignment. The responses show that Roy clearly did not understand many of the events in the story, which made

writing about the story difficult. This assignment is typical of the many double journal assignments Roy did. Field notes show that he often found these assignments frustrating, in one case stating loudly, "I hate to write," while working on a response to a reading assignment. In a few cases, notes show that he did not work on assignments, instead drawing or doodling until spoken to by the teacher.

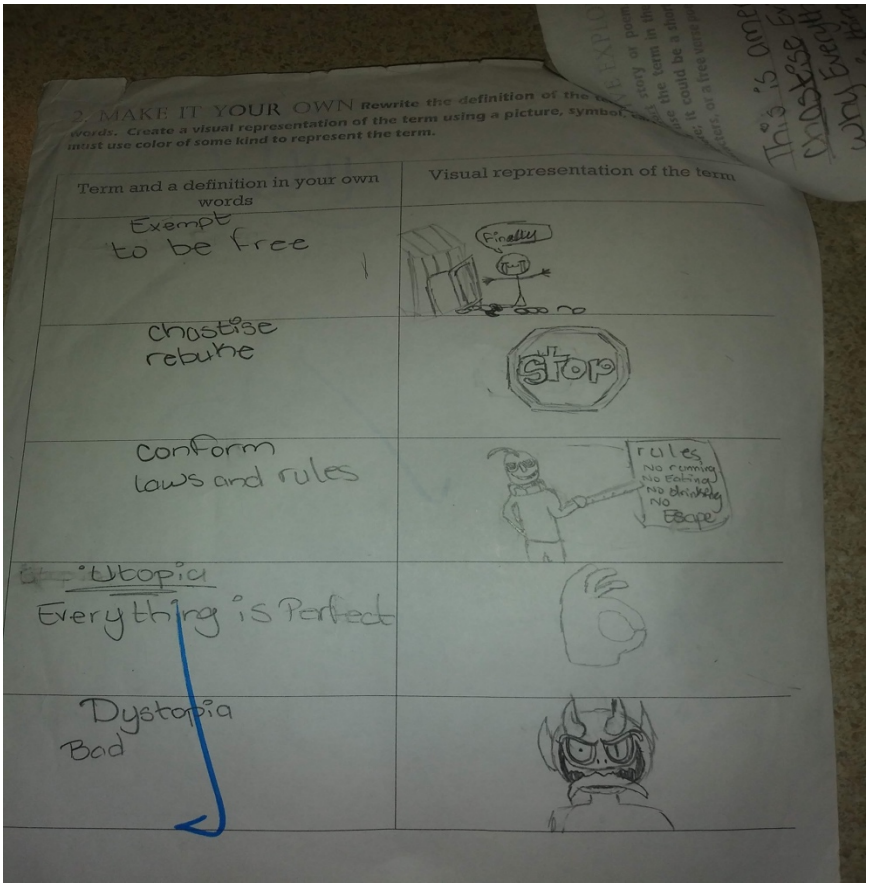
The lack of understanding derived from the double journal assignments contrasted with the level of understanding that Roy exhibited in the narrative writing about *The Giver* as described previously. While it is clear that he exhibited difficulties writing about inferences and struggled with comprehension, his narrative writing demonstrated that he understood the idea of "release" and was able to make connections to his own life. Furthermore, these connections expressed strong emotion; he would move to Canada if we had "release" in the United States!

Effectively uses visual in writing. During writing times, Roy would often draw instead of write. He shared these drawings with other students, sometimes switching papers with another student and adding to his drawings. If students had computers, he would often search for images and sometimes would show these images to other students.

As mentioned earlier, students completed a packet each week called a Language Acquisition Framework (LAF), designed to facilitate learning new vocabulary. On the first page of the packet, students were asked to look up the words using either a paper or online dictionary and copy the definition onto the paper. On the second page of this packet, pictured in Figure 4.23, students were supposed to write the definition in their own words and draw a picture illustrating the words. Roy composed his own definitions,

but these definitions did not completely and accurately describe the meaning of each word. He then took time to create detailed drawings illustrating the meaning of the words.

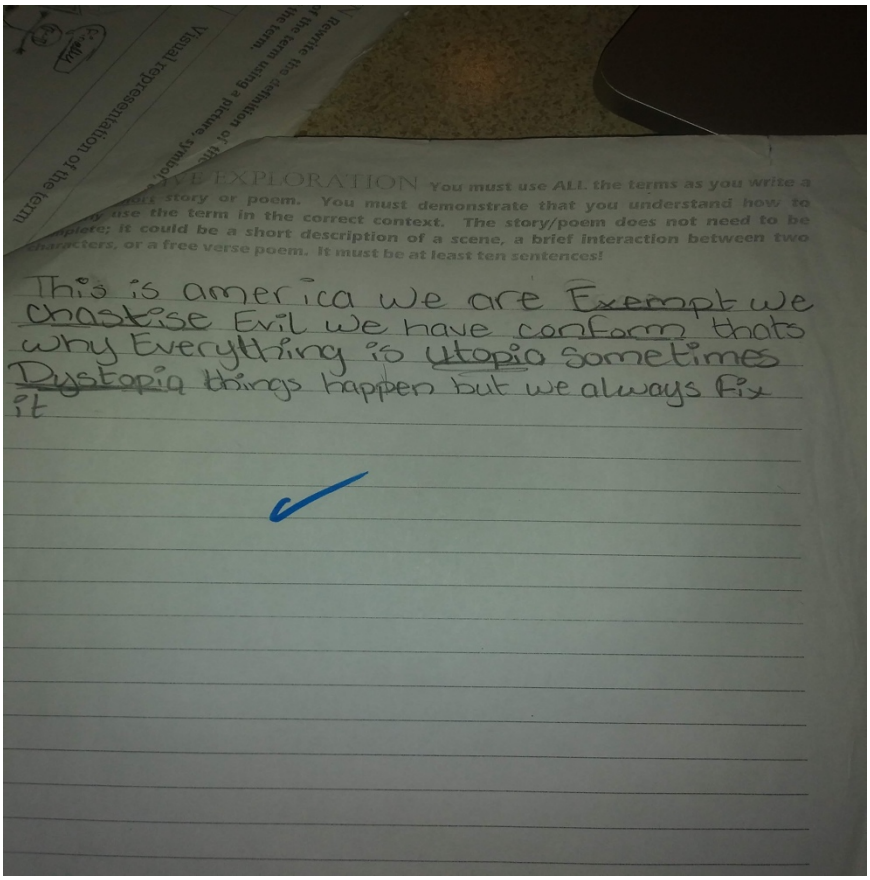
Figure 4.23. Roy's Vocabulary Drawings and Definitions



While Roy's drawings indicated at least a basic understanding of the word meanings, they more importantly demonstrated how Roy made meaning from the knowledge he had about the terms. For example, he drew a character pointing to a sign listing rules to illustrate the word "conform." The rules on the sign were "no running, no eating, no drinking, no escape."

From Figure 4.24, we get an idea how Roy interprets the word *conform* and that his interpretation was much more meaningful than the sentence in which he attempted to use the word below.

Figure 4.24 Roy's Vocabulary Story

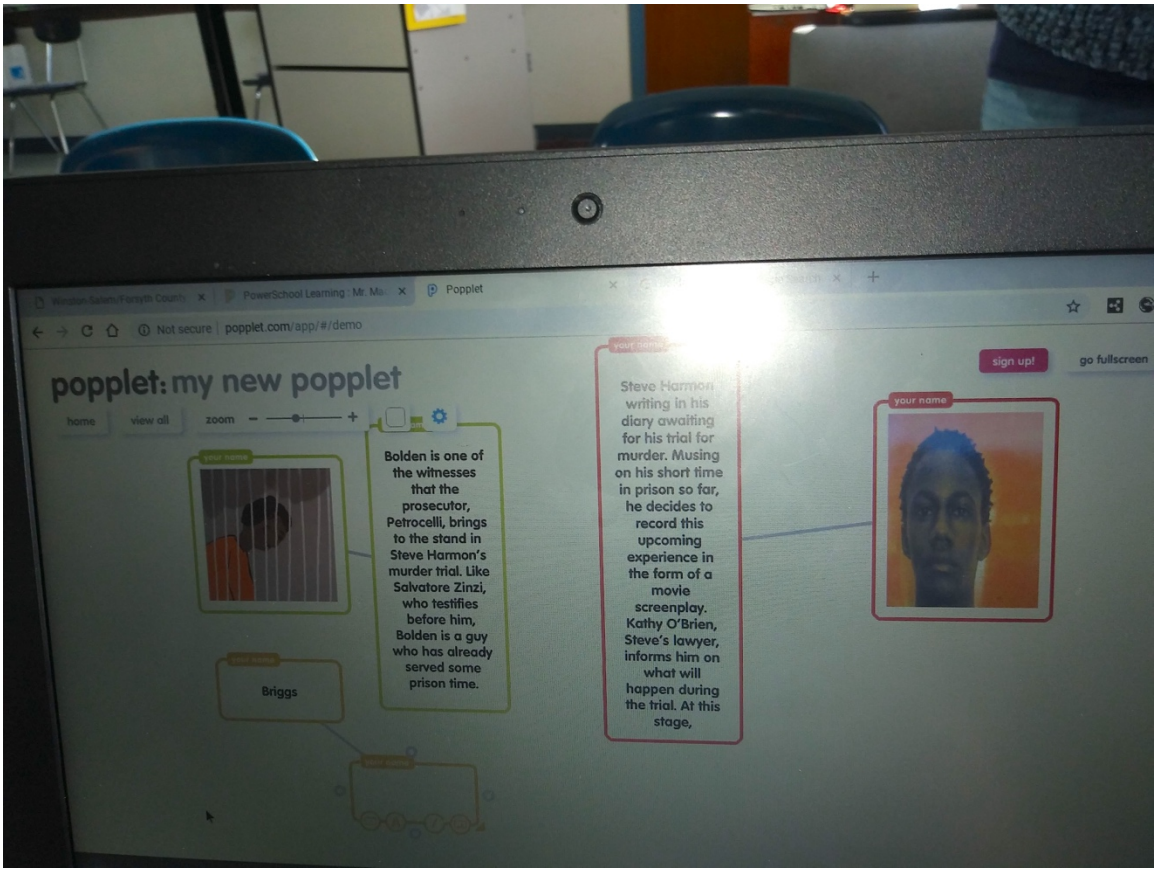


It is obvious that this assignment did not accomplish the type of vocabulary building for Roy that was intended. Even though he copied the meaning of the words from a dictionary onto the first page of packet, he was not able to write the definition is his own words. He did not fully grasp the meaning, so he could not then write about it. In this case, his lack of comprehension made his writing (the definition) meaningless.

What we can see from this assignment is that there is much to be learned from studying the way that Roy struggles to make meaning for each of the vocabulary words. From his drawings, we can also understand exactly what Roy is thinking as per the definition of each word. By drawing he is definitely processing meaning more clearly using visuals than words.

In another example (Figure 4.25), Roy used Popplet, on online graphic organizer, to describe the characters in *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers.

Figure 4.25 Roy's Popplet



Roy first found pictures online to represent each character. He then accessed Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, to find information about the characters in the book. It is obvious by reading these descriptions that Roy used "copy and paste" to construct his character descriptions; a check of the online encyclopedia during analysis confirmed this. During the process, however, he completed detailed descriptions of two characters, but did not have time to finish the assignment.

Even though he did not finish the work and the descriptions are not his own words, this process helped Roy to begin to understand the different characters in the book. Roy demonstrated his ability to use Google to find images and information on the Internet. He then used this information to create a graphic organizer using an online digital tool. The next step for Roy is to learn to put the character descriptions in his own words.

Considering the LAF assignment, the double journal and the graphic organizer, it was clear that Roy struggled to comprehend his reading and the meaning of words. He struggled to explain what he had learned in his reading and left on his own was not able to correctly use his newly learned vocabulary words in a sentence. By utilizing digital as well as paper visuals and through accessing the Internet, he was better able to understand and make meaning from his assignments.

Summary of Roy's writing experiences. Roy wrote at home and at school. He considered himself a poet but only wrote poetry at home and kept it private. His writing included visual elements that helped him express his ideas. He hinted at big ideas such as racism, pain, and death that leave the reader wishing for more detail. Often he did not

finish his writing assignments that had to do with responses to reading and this type of work included much less detail. He was most complete and expressive when he included visual along with text.

Roy's Writing Perceptions

What is writing?

Definition and tools. When I first interviewed Roy, he said that writing was something to do with the hand towards pencil and paper. He also said he did not like to write because it hurt his hand. When I asked him if using the computer was writing, however, he said yes, that as long as it was words, it was writing. During the focus group and second interview, Roy's idea of writing seemed to expand somewhat although still focused a bit on text. He told me that writing comes from the brain, and it is taking something out of the brain and putting it on paper. In this conversation, he compared writing to the concept of copying, indicating that copying was not writing but that writing involved putting it in your own words. He also went on to tell me that he used social media to communicate with his family members and friends, and he considered that writing as well.

Roy liked to draw and mentioned this often when asked about writing. "I write if I have to but if I have a choice, I draw." Because of this interest I asked him if drawing could be included as part of the writing process. He said, "Pictures are like half-writing because it tells you a story in visual."

These conversations indicate that it was Roy's tendency to define writing in traditional terms, but that his actual understanding of writing is more comprehensive.

Purpose of writing. In this same discussion, his reasoning about the purpose of writing was rather rudimentary. You needed writing to sign your name, to remember things, and for "bills and taxes." However, later when I asked if he still considered himself a poet, he talked about being in the mood to write.

Roy: Its like….When I'm in the mood.

April: Okay. What makes you in the mood?

Roy: When I am like calmed down, or like sometimes sad.

When he told me that he was a poet the first time, I asked if he had ever considered getting his poems published. He explained that no, the poems were just for him and that he wrote them when he was sad about something. This conversation, along with writing artifacts discussed in the above section, indicated that Roy wrote to express himself and as a form of therapy, but did not understand writing in this context. Whereas he used writing for these purposes, the official purpose of writing is more functional such as for signing his name and remembering things.

What makes good writing? Roy said that he was better at reading than writing and that he thought writing was hard. When asked to rate his writing, Roy said he was a "medium" writer. Like Bobby, he was not able to clearly explain how he rated his writing, so I asked him what made good writing. Once again, like the other two boys he said, "figurative language" and explained why he thought this,

> Because, using like...because if we didn't, if we didn't have figurative language we wouldn't be making like poems or stories today...we'd be making stories that really didn't make any sense.

In another example when asked why an author would use figurative language, Roy said, "To make the story interesting and to help the readers learn more words."

These answers show that Roy understood that figurative language makes writing more interesting, but he did not fully grasp the reasoning for the use of figurative language, as it does not really teach new words to the reader. Part of the reason Roy answered my question with "figurative language" could be because he knows that is the "right answer" due to emphasis on figurative language during class. He is learning to use the vocabulary of writers but does not fully grasp the ideas yet.

When I asked how he could improve his writing, he said that he could add more details and use figurative language. However, when asked to pick out his best writing from several samples, Roy picked out the diagram that he had completed on Popplet describing characters from the book *Monster*. He said this was good writing because it used visuals and that he was able to put more details in because he was using the computer. Once again, it is important to acknowledge that much of the actual text on the Popplet was copied from the Internet. Regardless, Roy recognized the important of the visuals and the amount of information he included as making the piece good.

I wanted to see if he was able to connect his drawing ability to his writing ability, so I asked him if he thought drawing something first and then writing about it would make the writing easier. He remarked,

Roy: Ummm…. me writing it out...will make it a little bit more easier?

April: Okay,

Roy: Because me drawing will make it like a little difficult. Because when you're drawing first...You're, it's like, drawing something random.

April: Okay?

Roy: And when you put, when you write it out, the picture and the words don't make sense.

It was hard to understand what Roy was trying to tell me with this last quote. After more conversation, I came to understand that he was saying that moving from the visual to text is difficult for him. When he draws something and then tries to write about it, the words do not describe his drawing adequately. Later in the conversation, he said that he could describe the picture easily if he were talking about it but not writing about it. For Roy it seemed that drawing is a natural process and writing is something that is difficult for him. He did not see the connection between writing and drawing. This is true, in spite of the fact that his writing often had doodles and other visual cues as discussed previously and the fact that he felt best about his writing that included visual elements.

Summary. Roy expressed a dichotomy between how he described good writing and its purpose and how he produced and used writing. He described writing as a functional process focused mainly as getting thoughts into text and described good writing by using terms he had been taught at school. He said he did not like to write at school; however, he wrote for self-therapy and expression and used visuals to enhance his writing.

What Helps or Hinders Roy's Writing?

Teachers. Roy did not seek out help from either of his teachers. During observations, I never saw him raise his hand to ask for help. He said that teachers helped him most by giving him notes and explaining things. He indicated in both interviews that the teacher helped him most by modeling annotations (i.e., working together as a class to read and take notes on a short text). About the annotations he explained, "He [Mr. Martin] explains each paragraph, like it gives you like a short summary of what each paragraph means."

The annotation work was mentioned by all three students at some point during the study as something that they found helpful. When I asked Mr. Martin about this, he said he felt that the EC students preferred explicit instruction and that is why they thought the annotations were helpful. Mr. Martin models the annotation on his own paper and students are able to copy exactly what he does on their own papers. Roy, however, mentioned that he appreciated the explanations of each paragraph. Therefore, Roy seemed to value the role of the teacher when he explicitly explained what to do or what something meant.

Roy did not express the same appreciation for the special education teacher, Mrs. Rigby, in regard to helping him with his work. Field notes indicate that while she sometimes sat beside him to help during a writing assignment, he refused help from her during other times. In interviews and in the focus group, he indicated that he thought her purpose was to keep him on task. He indicated that sometimes he needed a break and

that he felt that the teacher did not allow these breaks. "So it is like, when you are working and you just try to take one break…when you need a break, you need a break." Clearly Roy preferred to be left alone to work without interference from his teachers.

Peers. Working and talking with peers seemed to be important to Roy. When I asked about his favorite classes, he said, either this one (language arts) or PE. When I asked why he liked language arts, he said, "It is not usually difficult…sometimes…. it is like a group thing… usually we do like a group work."

I followed up by asking about group work, specifically why he likes group work. "So like if you can get their opinion, and probably learn something new." Later he described this idea again by saying that adding his ideas to other people's ideas "makes ideas bigger." In the focus group discussion, Roy talked about the importance of talking to his friends. He had already discussed how getting the opinions of others was important but topped the discussion with "God gave you a mouth for a reason."

During observations, I often noted Roy making comments to his seatmates during class discussions. These comments most often applied to the discussion that the class as a whole was having. Though Roy sometimes answered the teacher's questions, he was much more likely to engage in these short “clandestine” discussions with classmates. Similarly, while doing independent work, it was not unusual for Roy to be involved in conversations with classmates while also working on his assignments. During the Zine activity, Roy and his seatmates all decided to make Zines centered on a different character from the video game universe *Undertow*. Whereas Roy was working on an illustration on his own Zine, I noticed that he would sometimes switch papers with other

students and draw on his neighbor's paper. I had noticed this same type of activity happening during class when students were supposed to be independently reading. In this case, students were often drawing something from the book that they were reading. I would notice a student look around, then quickly switch papers with another student, and go back to reading and/ or drawing. Roy appreciated working with his peers and appeared to be more motivated when he had this option.

School context. During the focus group, I asked the boys how their school could help them become better writers. The requirement that students wear uniforms was brought up. The boys were not able to describe how the uniform requirement would affect their writing; however, Roy said that people needed freedom. He then said, "keeping somebody caged in there for a while and then when they come they are scared to do anything."

Even with further discussion, Roy could not explain exactly how he thought the school policy on uniforms affected his writing. Considering the points made in his writing, Roy may have been trying to say that the lack of freedom affects his ability to write freely. From those statements, it seems that Roy is constricted by school rules, ideas, or school speech. There is the possibility that he would be more likely to express himself further through writing in an environment that he felt was less constrictive.

Tools. Roy said that using the computer was helpful for him when writing. First, it helped him with transcription because otherwise writing hurt his hand. Second, he found editing and revising easier because using the computer made it easier to move

things around. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, he utilized the computer for finding information and visuals that he needed to use in his writing.

Conclusion

Roy does not seek help from his teachers but says he appreciates it when the teacher gives good explanations. Roy likes working with his peers and understands the importance of getting the opinions of other people. He has ideas that are somewhat expressed in his writing and uses visual elements to help him with this process. A classroom atmosphere in which he is allowed freedom to draw and to browse the Internet, and feels comfortable expressing opinions is most likely to result in better writing for Roy.

Roy has a lot to say about serious issues, but he may not feel comfortable expressing these ideas in the classroom environment. He uses writing and drawing as forms of self-expression and as a therapeutic release. His writing is more powerful when he uses visuals, but he does not yet understand the value of using these visuals in his writing. While he appreciates clear explanations from his teachers, he prefers to work at his own pace and resents direct help from the SE teacher. He values interacting with his peers and such interactions seem to be an important part of his creative process.

Summary of Chapter

Case studies are useful when the phenomenon being studied cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs (Merriam, 2009). In this chapter, I first described the overall context of the learning environment, giving the reader an understanding of the community, school and classroom where the learners learned. Next, I focused on each of

the three cases to present an understanding of each learner's writing experiences. Using their own words, each student provided a small peek into their home writing practices including traditional and digital writing. Through interviews and writing samples, the students then revealed information about their school writing practices. I augmented this information through observations and interviews of their teachers and attempted to understand each student's writing perceptions—how they felt about writing, how they defined it, and how they thought of its importance.

How can we use this information to effect outcomes that have the potential to make a difference in the writing lives of students with like Bobby, Roy, and Ski? In the next chapter, by looking across each of the three cases, I consider what researchers and practitioners can learn from these three writers, and more importantly, how this information should impact the field as researchers consider what questions to ask about how to teach students with LD to write.

CHAPTER V

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In the previous chapter, I shared findings from interviews, observations, and artifacts for each of the three individual students who were a part of this study. Readers of this paper now understand Ski, Bobby, and Roy as writers in terms of their writing experiences, writing perceptions, and factors that may help or hinder their writing. While these students share a diagnosis with LD, status as adolescents, and membership in their language arts classroom, they each have an individual reality that affects their writing life.

In this chapter, through cross-case analysis, it becomes apparent that while each student brings his own personal context to the classroom, there are similarities across all three cases that should be considered. By comparing and contrasting each of the cases, I build abstractions that exist outside of the context of each individual (Merriam, 2009). From here, ideas can be developed that may lead to a deeper understanding of the writing experiences of students with LD.

What are the Writing Experiences of Students with LD?

Early and Home Literacy Practices

Memories and perceptions. Student memories of early writing was limited but included both positive and negative perceptions. All three of the three boys mentioned a negative experience with writing or a negative perception of their own writing when they

were young. Roy talked about how writing hurt his hand and caused blisters. Bobby said writing was challenging and described himself vividly as a young student who left class at the end of the day and did not think about writing once he was away from school. Ski described his own writing when he was young as "bad "and said he struggled with writing and spelling. He went on to say that he worked on this by practicing and rewriting words over and over again.

In spite of these negative memories, each was able to tell me about a writing piece that they had done when they were younger that they were proud of having written. Bobby told about writing a story about Sponge Bob and having an imaginary friend. He said that these stories were usually short but that he had enjoyed writing them. Ski described a story he wrote in fifth grade about a trip he would go on if he had a certain amount of money. He told me that he wrote about going to the Bahamas and that in some ways it was true because he had actually visited there. Roy mentioned writing a poem in the style of Edgar Allen Poe. He enjoyed writing this because he enjoyed Poe's works and liked that he could write in the same way as a famous poet. None mentioned having anyone read their stories. They also did not tell of being able to publish their works or getting rewards or praise for them.

The positive writing experiences that each of the three boys mentioned included creative writing assignments with an element of choice. Bobby wrote about his favorite TV show, Ski about a place he had visited, and Roy emulated a poet that he enjoyed. Negative experiences for Ski and Roy involved the mechanics of writing.

Traditional writing at home. Roy was the only student among the three who self-identified as a writer. He said he was a poet and talked about writing at home when he was in the mood, which he described as feeling sad. He said he wrote poems about death, darkness, and things that happened in his life. In the same conversation, however, he said that he really preferred to draw rather than write and that often he would draw characters from video games that he enjoyed.

Only Bobby said he wrote better at home than at school and he was the only student that shared writing done at home with me. Ski said he wrote letters at home for his grandparent's birthdays or if "something had happened to them."

All three mentioned at least one example of someone at home writing. Roy said that his family has a website and his sister likes to read and write. Ski said his mom sometimes wrote letters. Ski also mentioned writing letters to his grandparents indicating that this could be something that he does with his mom. Bobby expressed that he has a cousin who does not live with him but sometimes helps him with his writing by going over it with him. This indicates that Bobby shares his writing with at least one person in his family.

All three of the boys mentioned some, albeit limited, examples of writing happening at their houses (i.e. letter writing, homework, a website, and poetry), but only Bobby mentioned getting support from a family member. All three reported that they did their homework on their own.

Social media. In contrast to doing little traditional writing at home, all three students said they wrote using social media at home. At first, students did not include

their use of social media as writing. However, when I specifically asked if they considered their use Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat or texting to be writing, they agreed that it could be writing or reading. They also indicated that this type of writing was very practical for them. They used social media to communicate with friends and family, as well as to share ideas about things that they liked such as video games and sports.

Bobby's use of social media seemed the most prolific as he said that when he was at home he was either doing homework or using his phone. He seemed a little embarrassed about this when he told me; stopping during the conversation to think of something that he did that was not using his phone. Then, he went on to describe using social media as a way to obtain news and keep up with current events as well as a way to express ideas to friends.

Roy also described interacting with friends on social media. He talked mostly about posting information and having discussions about video games. He also said that he learned about new video games on social media but went to the store to do more research about them rather than relying on what he heard on the Internet.

Roy was the only student who obviously utilized language learned online in his school writing. He explained this to me specifically describing how the language of texting is different from language used at school, which is why he included an interpretation of an acronym that he used in his writing. He also used language in his writing that is commonly used among gamers, indicating an ability to adapt to social norms within the online community.

Ski talked the least about using social media. He only mentioned using texts to communicate with friends and family about sports and gaming. He said that he played video games and sometimes let his brother play a particular game that he liked. Though he did not indicate that he collaborated with others at home, often his conversation with his peers at school centered on video games. In some cases, these conversations resulted in literary activities such as the creation of his Zine, discussed in other parts of this paper.

Overall, each boy used social media at home as both consumer and producer of information. All used social media to communicate with friends and family. Bobby and Ski used it to facilitate conversation about topics they are interested in and to learn about current events. The amount of social media use and the way that it is used varies significantly for each.

School Writing

Struggle to complete work and stay engaged. All three students struggled to complete their writing assignments, although each at a different level, and each approached the struggle differently. Ski was the most diligent, consistently trying to complete his work correctly, although he often seemed to be the least successful of the three. Bobby often was not engaged in his writing, putting assignments aside to do at home; yet would try extra hard at other times to finish especially when told that he must do so by the teacher. Roy varied his work habits, sometimes working on his writing, other times drawing and talking to friends. All three wrote less with lower quality when responding to reading and wrote more when writing about himself or a topic of choice.

***Responses to reading*.** Responses to reading that required analyses were difficult for all three boys. Examples of this type of work included the double journal entries where they were asked to find a quote and analyze it in some way. In these assignments, all three students often took longer to get started, did not complete the assignments, and did not accurately answer the question or provide the analysis needed. In many cases it appeared that the students (all three) did not understand the content of the reading or possibly the instructions for the assignment. Bobby was most specific about his struggles when I asked him about this type of writing, saying that he had trouble remembering what he had read.

In contrast to responses to reading done on paper, all three students were more engaged when allowed to use digital technology. Bobby was able to work for 30 minutes and provide information on a Lucid chart about the novel they were reading. Roy, likewise, was able to create a Popplet with information about characters in a book, even though as noted earlier, he copied and pasted this information from a website. Ski also used digital technology with success. His most complete work being done on the digital bulletin board when answering questions asked by the teacher about reading that had been completed in class.

Although their writing was more complete, and they were more engaged when using digital technology, all the boys struggled when writing about reading regardless of the modality they were using.

Personal connections in writing. Students varied in how they expressed their own opinions and made personal connections in their writing, but all utilized narrative

writing prompts to do so. Of the three Bobby was most likely to write about personal events and to express his feelings. He wrote about his mother's passing, about friends making fun of his football team, about his parents arguing, and about his girlfriend snubbing him. He shared fears about the future and introspective thoughts about friendship and life in general. He willingly shared his work with his teacher and with me.

In contrast, Ski hinted at personal situations in his life such as disagreements with his mother and with people in the neighborhood but did not elaborate. He sometimes attempted to share deeper ideas, but often was unable to express these thoughts fully on paper, requiring me to ask questions in order to understand what he meant.

Roy shied away from close personal issues but made connections to current events in ways that were meaningful to him. For example, he talked about slavery when making a connection to the Salem Witch Trials and then moved on to the treatment of Black people under President Trump. Although these thoughts opened up opportunities for meaningful connections, they were short and not elaborated upon.

Visual and home writing. Roy was unique among the three students in that he included visuals and home writing styles in his school writing. This included using acronyms commonly used in texting, dotting his eyes with circles, drawing in the margins and back of papers, and including pictures in digital work.

Peer interaction. All three interacted with their peers in regard to their writing although they did not directly collaborate. Ski and Roy interacted regularly with a similar group of boys by sharing ideas, books, and drawing together. Bobby was less collaborative with assignments but valued interaction with his peers.

All three said that working together with peers was important and that it helped them, at least in some circumstances. Bobby said it was hard to work with others, but that it was important because he would have to work with others in a job. Roy said that working with others helped make his ideas bigger because he could "add" his peers' ideas to his own.

Across the three cases, there is a picture of homes with some traditional writing, but prolific use of social media. In school, students vary in their use of narrative writing as opportunities to share ideas and personal experiences, however all write more and with more meaning when allowed to write about themselves or topics of their choice.

All the students struggle to write about reading but when using digital technology, use a variety of software to help them stay engaged and complete assignments. Peers are important to all three boys. Roy, especially, likes to draw and utilizes drawings and visuals in his writing.

How do Students with LD Perceive Writing?

For this question, I sought to answer how students define writing, how they perceive its importance, and if they generally have had positive or negative reactions to writing. Research has shown that students with LD do not fully grasp the importance of writing and have negative views of their writing ability (Santangelo, 2014). We know that the process and definition of writing has changed over time as technologies have progressed. Knowing whether or not students with LD have writing definitions that have evolved along with the functional meaning of writing can be instructive to how they

approach the writing process. Next, I discuss the cross-case analysis of the three students' perceptions of writing.

Varied Definitions of Writing

When asked to define writing, all three boys indicated the idea of converting thoughts to paper in text form as their first definitions. However, while they first mentioned pencil and paper as tools for writing, when prompted, they quickly agreed that writing could be accomplished with digital tools. They all agreed that it did not matter if you used a phone, computer or pencil, since text was involved in that writing process.

In addition, when I asked about the use of video, audio or other types of multimodal writing, Roy and Bobby agreed that those modes counted as writing as well. They also indicated that thinking and expressing ideas and imagination were types of writing. Roy specifically indicated that copying was not writing. He stated that information had to be put into the writer's "own words" for it to count as writing.

Ski differed from the other students in that his definition of writing was static throughout most of the study and largely included the textual and mechanical aspect of writing. When I asked him about the use of audio and video as part of writing, he thought about it and replied that he" just did not know." Then he told me that the main thing he thought about when thinking about writing was getting finished.

Varied Perceptions of Writing Ability

The three students had significantly different perceptions of their own writing abilities. Bobby insisted throughout the study that he was a good writer, going as far to say that he would rate his writing at 1000 when using a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the

best. He was not, however, able to explain why he thought he was a good writer. Roy rated his writing as medium, saying that he really preferred to draw. Ski insisted that he was a bad writer and told me this during both interviews and the focus group. When I asked him to assign a grade to his narrative writing piece, he graded it as a B plus, which is not congruent of his description of "bad" writing. Upon discussion, it became clear that he thought the content of his writing was good and that it was his handwriting that he rated as bad. After I was able to help him differentiate between the idea of the mechanical aspects of writing, such as handwriting and spelling, and the content of his writing, he talked about positive aspects of his content. The realization that Ski's perception of his own writing was based on his definition of writing emphasizes the importance of understanding what students think makes good writing.

What Makes Good Writing

School language and experience was most dominant when describing what made good writing. All three students mentioned factors most often discussed in class, such as handwriting, mechanics, and structure. All three students mentioned figurative language, which had been discussed recently in their Language Arts class. The three differed in the areas that they emphasized with Ski focusing mostly on handwriting while the other two talked about content as well as structure and handwriting.

The Purpose of Writing

All three students shared ideas about how writing was used in vocations and in personal life, but they were not able to elaborate with much detail. For example, Bobby

mentioned that you needed writing for writing checks, but he could not explain more. "Just writing period, it doesn't gotta to be a check... just writing a letter…. anything."

Roy said, "It can be used for like remembering or like completing something or you use it for your name." Ski said that some people had to write at their job but was not sure what they might write. He did say that people could write about laws and referenced the *Declaration of Independence* as an example. Thus, they all had vague ideas of the importance of writing but could not give strong explanations of how they might use writing outside of school.

The findings in this study indicated that the students' perceptions of writing and of their own writing ability are related. Limited understandings of writing may have contributed to their abilities and motivation to write and write well, at home and at school. In the next section, I consider overall findings for what helps and hinders students in the writing process.

What Factors Help or Hinder Writing for Students with LD?

When the study began this question was narrow in scope, as the emphasis was to understand how teachers and their peers supported students with LD with writing in an inclusion classroom. Through data analysis it became apparent that student writing was supported by multiple factors in addition to teachers and peers. Because the overall purpose of this study is to understand the writing experiences of students with LD, it was important to expand this question to consider all factors that emerged as supporting student writing. Sub-categories that emerged from the data to answer this question were self, teachers, peers, context and tools.

Self

When students were asked about factors that could help them improve their writing, Bobby and Ski spoke about their own efforts. For example, Bobby said that he needed to focus on his writing and that students needed to care about their work. He added that not talking or being loud in class would help as well. Ski also emphasized his own efforts. Describing his writing process, he explained, "I think about what I am probably going to write about and when I have to write about something, I try to do the best writing that I can…so I don't mess it up." He also said he worked harder, slowed it down and could add more details when I asked what factors helped him improve his writing. During the focus groups, students talked about these types of factors and only after prompting were they able to give some information about how their teachers or school or classroom policies might affect their writing. Roy was unique among the three as he did not speak about his own efforts when asked what factors would improve his writing. Instead he referred to using technology, collaborating with peers and teacher explanations.

Teachers

All three students thought that teacher explanations help them with their writing. These explanations seemed to be focused more on helping students to understand the assignment or the reading material rather than helping them with the actual writing. When I asked about factors that helped them write, all three students mentioned annotations. These "annotations" were modeled by Mr. Martin and copied by students on their own papers as they completed readings as a class. For example, when the students

read an informational text about arranged marriages, Mr. Martin circled the word spouse, drew an arrow to the margin and after discussing the meaning of the word with the class, wrote "lifelong partner." Roy said that these annotations helped because Mr. Martin explained each paragraph while they were working on them.

The importance of the annotations and the fact that all three mentioned that Mr. Martin helped them by providing explanations reemphasizes the idea that all three students struggle to understand their reading. Because students were often writing about reading, these explanations were important but not always adequate. Often, they were left confused and not understanding the ideas in the reading, so could not write well enough to answer the questions or complete the writing assignment that they had been given.

While they were physically writing, students preferred to be left alone to work. This was most prevalent in data referencing the special education teacher, who they perceived as being there to keep them on task. They discussed needing to take breaks during writing, wanting to talk to their friends, and the need to have time to understand what they needed to do and to get started. Ski related this when he described his frustration with the special education teacher sitting with him and helping him with his web quest assignment. Not only did he disagree with the type of help she was giving him, he wanted to do it his own way, in the way that he interpreted the assignment.

The students did not mention needing teachers to help them with grammar, spelling, mechanics or punctuation. When I observed Mr. Martin working with students

both individually and with groups, most of the time was spent helping them to understand the assignment - what they needed to do rather than how to do it.

Peers

Peer interaction for Ski and Roy was an integral part of class. They interacted while writing using both traditional and digital tools. They appeared more comfortable talking with their small group than with the class as a whole. Attention from classmates was important to Bobby but can be distracting; he sometimes separated himself from others to work on assignments. All three were successful when working with groups. All three used the digital bulletin board to post ideas and opinions in response to teacher questions. Two of the students, Roy and Bobby, were able to express why being able to work as a group is important. Roy said that when he put his ideas together with those of other people, the ideas got bigger. Bobby said that it was important to get other perspectives. Only Ski could not explain why working with peers was helpful, however he described how talking to his peers would help him complete his work. Observations showed that the boys did not want to write together or work on joint projects. Instead they liked to work by themselves but get help or discuss the work with their peers.

Context/Tools

School. Students did not mention the school environment having an effect on their writing until I explicitly asked if the school itself helped them be better writers. At that point, all mentioned that having to wear standard mode of dress was a problem. The boys felt that they should have more freedom and be able to choose their own clothes. They gave other examples of how they felt the school squelched their freedom. This

included constant monitoring, not allowing any kind of goofing off, not allowing cell phones, and "treating them like little kids."

Even though the students brought this topic up when I asked how their school affected their writing, they were not able to explicitly explain the effects. They did reiterate, however, that they felt the being able to choose your clothing and being able to make decisions was important. One assumption that could be made is that students felt generally restricted at school and this could have affected the topics about which they wrote.

The strict no cell phone policy also affected students writing. Students were not allowed to have their cell phone in class at any time. This policy was obviously effective and enforced, as I did not see a student cell phone the entire time I was there. During one-on-one and group interviews, students discussed using their phones at home, but of course not at school. While this policy was effective at reducing distractions and keeping students from communicating with each other throughout the day for safety reasons, it also eliminated the opportunity for students and teachers to utilize student phones for academic purposes. Digital tools or social media had to be accessed through teacher direction and school resources.

Digital tools and multimodal writing. The three students each said that using the computer was a way to improve their writing. They mentioned the ease of keyboarding verses handwriting, that the computer made editing and revising easier, and that it provided access to information. They also liked how they could share information using

the digital bulletin board. Roy mentioned the importance of being able to use Google to find visuals in his writing.

Students were able to use the Internet to find information and pictures, and to access online platforms. Students sometimes needed support in using particular websites such as the case with Ski when he struggled to add text to his Popplet. A review of Roy's final Popplet indicated that he copied and pasted information from Wikipedia for his chart. This shows to me a need to teach students how to find and summarize information to use for assignment completion.

In general, students believed that they could improve their writing. They focused on their own efforts but did not name specific strategies that they could use to write better. They appreciated teachers who explained the assignments to them and enjoyed working with their peers. They prefer to use digital technology to write for transcription purposes and for versatility. Students wanted autonomy when they worked, preferring to work at their own pace, and getting help only when needed.

In the next chapter, I discuss what we can learn from Ski, Roy, and Bobby regarding their writing experiences.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT WE LEARN FROM RINGO, GEORGE, AND PAUL

In chapter five, I answered the three research questions in terms of abstractions that emerged across all the cases. These abstractions can now be considered in terms of the research literature stemming from the theoretical framework for this study. In this manner, I consider what we can learn from Bobby, Ski, and Roy in terms of how students with learning disabilities (LD) experience writing.

The theoretical framework for this study includes three bodies of literature that affect the writing of students with LD. These are (a) youth cultural studies, which consider the way that youth are positioned in society; (b) research about what is known in regards to students with LD and the way they are taught to write; and (c) what we know about the ever changing nature of writing, including models that explain how writing happens and the importance of 21st Century Literacy Skills.

By considering the LD designation together with youth cultural studies, I am placing the emphasis of the study squarely on the student cases, considering them not only just as students with an IEP, but also as youth who are positioned in a certain way in society based on their age, gender, and race.

I include both the socio-cultural model and the cognitive model of writing. The socio-cultural model places emphasis on the setting and the context of the writing environment, considering how power structures, societal norms, and mismatch between

home and writing environments may affect writing (Barnard & Campbell, 2005). The cognitive model of writing, on the other hand, considers writing in terms of what happens in the brain of the writer (Flower & Hayes, 1981). How he or she navigates his/her way through various stages of writing and the psychological processes such as working memory, short term memory, and executive functioning that are required for successful writing,

Whereas many studies consider only one model of writing, when considering students with LD, it is important to focus on both of these models. Student with LD are both adolescents affected by cultural and societal norms and unique in there psychological and cognitive profiles. When one status is set aside to focus on the other, the result is a study that attempts to take the phenomenon out of the context. Because people cannot be separated from their context, it is important to consider all aspects of writing instruction for students with LD. Thus, we must consider the environment that surrounds the students, including the power structures that affect decision-making, the context the student brings to the environment, and the cognitive functioning that is going on when a student is attempting to write.

Lastly the nature of writing, its importance and its constant changing status based on technologies, must be considered as we think about how best to teach students with LD to write. Writing is a changing technology, and today's students live in a world where writing as a textual-based endeavor has transitioned to include multi-modes of communication. When we consider the cognitive challenges of many students with LD, this becomes even more important as these new modes of writing present challenges as

well as promises for the writing of students with LD. Most importantly, if we are to empower students by giving them the benefits of being good writers, it is necessary to make sure the skills we are teaching are relevant for use in the 21st century.

This study adds to the literature by bringing these aspects together and considering carefully the lessons learned from these three cases: Bobby, Ski, and Roy. In this chapter, I consider themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis in terms of the theoretical framework. Finally, considering the theoretical underpinnings of this study, I discuss what the findings mean in terms of writing and writing instruction for students with LD, including implications for researchers and teachers.

Discussion

The findings from the cross-case analysis fit into three major constructs that are relevant to the purpose of this study.

First, I discuss relationships between how students perceive writing in general, their knowledge of writing, and their assessment of their own writing ability. The importance of understanding student perceptions and how this can impact their learning is also be discussed as well as suggestions for improving student perception.

Second, I discuss the importance of 21st century writing skills and how students used these skills in the study. I review different ways that 21st century skills are manifested in the classroom and ways that these skills can benefit students with LD. Barriers that teachers must overcome while integrating these skills are discussed.

Lastly, I cover the students' desire for autonomy in their writing lives, and the importance of considering the ways we treat youth in regard to their writing. I show how this problem is amplified for students with LD.

Writing Perceptions

Definition and perception of writing ability. Findings from this study showed that the students' perceptions of their own writing ability were intertwined with their functional definition of writing. Interestingly, this definition was not necessarily related to their idea of what made writing good. For example, Ski insisted throughout the study that he was a bad writer. Upon further discussion I was able to ascertain that he felt this way because of his view of his handwriting. He said his work was not neat and his letters were not clear. However, when I asked him about the ideas in his writing, he said that his ideas were good. In contrast, Bobby felt that he was a great writer and when asked about his definition of writing, he mentioned concepts such as thinking and ideas as well as the functional concept of putting text on paper.

How students feel about their own writing ability is important because studies have shown that academic self-efficacy is the major factor that influences student motivation (Garcia & de Caso, 2004). In general, researchers have agreed that motivation plays an important role in helping students improve their writing skills (Harris & Graham, 2013). Students, therefore, who believe that they are better writers, will be more likely to write. If they have positive beliefs about their ability to manage the writing process, they will take more time to plan and organize before beginning and then be willing to revise and edit their work extensively (Garcia & de Caso, 2004).

Essentially, they will believe that the result of their work will be good writing and therefore will make the effort to write.

It is particularly important to consider how students in this study felt about their writing ability. This is because although some studies have shown that students with LD have lower academic self-efficacies than that of typical students, this does not always apply to writing (Garcia & de Caso, 2004). In fact, some studies have found that writing self-efficacy of students with LD is inflated (Graham, 2006). Hence, students with LD may think that they are better writers than is reflected by school grading systems. Within the present study, this could to be true for Bobby based on his positive statements about his writing ability, but not for Ski who said his writing was bad. In the case of these two students, a mediating factor was their definition of writing.

Socio-cultural writing theorists believe that institutions of power such as governments, schools, and classroom can set expectations as to what types of content, style, and focus are considered good writing (Prior, 2006). The notion of good writing therefore is not universal. For example, what counts as good writing in a modern advertising agency may be very different from the idea of good writing as determined by a dissertation committee. Still, both of those impressions of good writing are most likely different from what is considered good writing in a middle school classroom in the southeastern United States, where this study took place. In fact, in the latter setting, what makes good writing is most likely to be determined by the requirements of standardized tests that students must take. Mr. Martin expressed this view when he shared with me

that although he understood the importance of the whole child, that the school administration was mainly concerned about test scores.

Because student testing in the district focused on reading and mathematics, most of the emphasis on writing involved skills that would be needed to pass reading tests at the end of the school year. Findings in this study showed that most writing assignments were responses to reading and that this type of writing was the most difficult for the study participants. Although, from the collected data, it is not possible to determine if this difficulty was due to a lack of understanding the reading or a lack of ability to write or a combination of both, it is evident that writing about reading was difficult for all three students. Therefore, it should be considered that the emphasis on response to reading could negatively affect the students' overall perception of their writing ability.

It should be noted that while Mr. Martin emphasized in interviews that he knew he was expected to use standards-based teaching, and that he felt the overall goal of the administration was to improve test scores, he also valued the use of writing as a way to give his students an outlet to talk about their lives. I observed that while in the context of a highly prescriptive school setting, within the classroom, there was an understanding of writing that did not always focus on test scores. The narrative writing that students did each morning as they entered the classroom was an example of Mr. Martin's effort in this regard. Students were always given a suggested prompt but were allowed to choose another topic if they wished to do so.

Because students with LD struggle with all aspects of writing, and teachers are legally required to use research-based methods to instruct them, often the research and

teaching focus is on specific cognitively-based strategies that help students improve specific writing skills (Baker et al., 2009). The focus on cognitive skills and processes, while important for students with LD, may overshadow the need to provide writing opportunities that are designed to motivate and inspire writing.

Extended writing opportunities in which students are allowed a choice of topics and given time to write and receive support from instructors, such as happened in the narrative writing project in this study, have been shown to have positive results for students (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). Sometime called process writing or writing workshop, this extended writing time provides a more authentic writing experience, allowing for the hierarchical process described by Flowers and Hayes (1981). During these types of extended writing times, general and special education teachers can work together to provide classroom mini-lessons and individualized instruction. This instruction can target specific skills that students need to successfully write and meet IEP goals in a way that fits that natural ebb and flow of the classroom (McLeskey & Waldron, 2007).

In addition, opportunities to use digital technology and build multimodal presentations are often cited by students and teachers as contributing to student motivation to write. In addition, the opportunity to publish writing and have an audience beyond the teacher, as happened with the digital bulletin board, are all opportunities to improve motivation for writing (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007).

The purpose of writing. Another factor important in the motivation to write is understanding the many functions of writing in a literate society (Boscolo & Gelati,

2007). Students need to understand and value writing beyond its use in school. Research has shown that students with LD are less knowledgeable about writing than their peers (Brandt, 2015). The three students in this study not only struggled to define writing, as discussed earlier, but also revealed a narrow understanding of the purpose of writing. All three students mentioned the idea of writing as a transcription process, conveying thoughts to paper. There was, however, variation to the degree to which each student felt that writing is a form of self-expression or requires thought and interpretation. Even though Roy indicated that he wrote poetry when he was sad, he did not indicate that he used writing to make himself feel better or that others used it in this way. Bobby, on the other hand, said that he liked to express his opinions through writing. He also defined writing as thinking at one point in our conversation, saying you had to think in order to write.

Students also had difficulty describing how writing could be used beyond school, especially when talking about vocations. They all agreed that most jobs would require writing and gave simple examples of how writing might be used in a job, such as to write a check or to sign your name. They did not mention writing that is done in ways that require more skill such as writing emails, communications, or memos. When thinking about work, they seemed to consider narrow definitions of writing.

Understanding student perceptions of writing, what they think it is, what makes good writing, and how they view their writing ability is important for teachers and researchers. Research in this area for students with LD is somewhat contradictory especially as we consider writing self-efficacy. Considering that the three students in this

study had wildly different self-efficacies and had different levels of writing motivation, it is reasonable to believe that students with LD are not heterogeneous in this area. Seeking and considering the viewpoint of students with LD is the only way to really understand their writing perspectives.

Twenty-First Century Skills

Twenty-first century skills are literacy skills needed for success in today's environment. The NCTE Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment (2013) asserts that to be effective in the 21st century, citizens and workers must be able to create, evaluate, and effectively utilize information, media, and technology. Twenty-first century skills incorporate the use of digital tools and resources, as well as the importance of collaboration with others to work and solve problems. With regard to writing, being able to work with others within and across cultures to produce meaningful writing in a variety of modes is a necessity in many workplaces.

The findings of this study indicate that students were using 21st century skills in relation to their writing in various ways at home and at school. The discussion that follows considers how students are practicing these skills and the various perceptions that students and teachers have about these activities. Specifically, I discuss the use of social media, digital technology, and multimodal writing.

Social media. All three students in the study utilized social media for various purposes and as the most prevalent way that they practiced literacy at home. Scholars are beginning to understand that time spent on social media is valuable, as students are developing and practicing literacy skills that are important in workplace settings and can

be transferred to classroom learning (Kinzer, 2010; Moje, 2002a). In spite of this understanding, the use of social media is often framed in negative terms, lamenting the time spent rather than considering how students may be learning and honing literacy skills (DeVoss et al., 2010).

Bobby displayed this negative understanding while describing his free time. While providing a list of social media sights that he often used, he hesitated and then explained that he was trying to think of something other than playing video games and "messing with his phone." This gave me the impression that he considered his use of social media in negative terms.

This negative framing is a result of what Lesko calls the "misrepresentation of adolescence," (Lesko, 2012). Rather than recognizing the value of the time spent on social media, adults tend to think this is wasted time with deviant purposes (boyd, 2014). However, Bobby's description of his time on social media did not seem like time wasted. After making a point to tell me that he liked to play outside and be active, Bobby said he used social media to "keep up with the world" as well as communicated with friends, indicating that he was using a variety of literacy skills.

Roy's description of collaborating with other gamers while working his way through a strategy-based video game was another example of how social media can be used to develop or enhance skills that can be used at school. He described communicating with others through texts and orally as he planned his next move. Through his online activities, he was also developing an understanding of language used

in online environments and was becoming adept at merging his home and online literacy practices (Gee & Hayes, 2011).

Although I did not study the students' social media use beyond their personal descriptions, these comments provided enough information to indicate that they have digital literacies that extend beyond their schoolwork and traditional writing skills. There is a belief that much can be learned from understanding how students use digital literacy skills used on social media (Moje, 2002). In many cases these skills are self-taught or learned from peers. However, it is important to remember that students will need support and often direct instruction while learning to navigate many digital environments.

Digital technology. While many students have learned digital technology skills through multiple use at home, Boyd (2014) points out that it is important that teachers do not assume that students know the skills or have the dispositions needed to be digitally literate. While, the term "digital native" has been used to describe today's students who have grown up using digital technology, teachers have often found that when using specific software, students need significant support (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015). Students who are prolific users of the Internet may not understand the value of their social media use or how to critically consider the information they find online. Other problems stem from a lack of procedural skills such as knowing how to log on to particular websites, to use and remember passwords and usernames, and to use various search engines, as well as keeping up with the different rules of specific pieces of software.

Findings in the present study indicated that while students liked using digital technology and that it generally resulted in better writing, students also struggled to use certain aspects of the technology. For example, when Ski was building a Popplet, he successfully opened the program, but forgot to open a text box so he could not add text to his diagram. Other times, students needed assistance navigating various links and websites to find the information they needed. If students do not have the skills needed to operate the software, they are less likely to have successful writing experiences related to it (Peterson-Karlan, 2011).

In addition to the need for basic skills used to navigate and successfully use various software, students must be able to critically discern the information that is online. This involves knowing where to find accurate information, how to know that the information they are using is credible, and how to use that information without plagiarizing (Leu et al., 2004). As discussed earlier, Roy successfully searched Google to find information that he needed to complete an assignment, but then copied and pasted the information directly into his work rather than paraphrasing or summarizing. This is an important skill that most likely will require specific instruction to help him learn.

Hutchinson and Colwell (2015) describes the goal of integrating technology into literacy instruction at school as making students more literate. Therefore, digital technology should not be taught simply for the purpose of using the technology, but in conjunction with the skills students need to obtain. The prevalence of digital technology and its many changing platforms, as well as the speed with which it changes, has created the need to have and understand how to use specific skills and terminology in order to

successfully use these tools (Kinzer, 2010). Teachers need to teach these skills to students.

Once students overcome any barriers to using digital technology, these tools can be very beneficial for students with LD in all parts of the writing process (Kinzer, 2010). Students in the present study used laptop computers in the classroom almost daily after the first two months of school. Laptops were for transcription, but also to access the digital bulletin board, for planning or organizing through the use graphic organizers, as a way to express what they had learned using Storyboard, to build presentations in Google slides, to access Web quests, and to find visuals and music lyrics. All three students and the teacher said they preferred doing assignments with the computers. The computers made handwriting easier, allowed them to find and add pictures to their work, and were generally more motivating that pencil and paper assignments. The use of the digital bulletin board gave the students a chance to share writing with the whole class allowing the students a larger audience for their writing (i.e., other than the teacher). Students were also able to comment and receive comments about entries posted on the digital bulletin board.

Multimodal writing. Closely related to digital writing is multimodal writing. Digital technology is often inherently multimodal as software and technology makes it easy to include video, audio and still pictures along with text to create comprehensive pieces of writing. All digital writing is not multimodal, however, as students who use a word processing program to write a story using text only do not experiencing multimodal writing. Adding multiple modes can be beneficial to students with LD.

Multimodal writing enhances traditional text by including visual, audio, textual, gestural or spatial modes to communicate ideas (Bruce et al., 2013). While multimodal writing can include digital technology, it does not always. For example, when students make a poster or a diorama, they are often partaking in multimodal writing. In the present study, multimodal writing was a significant factor in the writing of some students in the classroom, even though the teacher did not always sanction it.

Roy, especially, used multimodal writing (i.e., visual representations) to make meaning of what he read and to express himself. He identified himself as a visual person and spoke of drawing instead of writing at home and was often observed drawing in class. When Roy was given the chance to use visuals in his writing, he always did, using Google to find pictures to download and add to his writing pieces. In addition, Roy added visual elements such as arrows or circles at times to his writing. Although Roy was not able to say how drawing specifically helped him to write, reviewing his work shows evidence that Roy used drawing and visuals elements to help him improve his writing.

Because many students with LD have weaknesses in the cognitive processes that are needed for good writing, (i.e., short term and working memory, long term memory, executive processing skills), it is important to consider ways to support students in these areas (Berninger et al., 2008). Research has shown that drawing as part of planning to write or as a part of revision can help students improve the content and clarity of their writing (Bomer et al., 2010). Although he does not realize it, by drawing pictures and using visuals in his writing, Roy was utilizing multi-modes to improve his writing.

It is important to consider, then, that students, such as Roy who used multimodal writing naturally, may be more likely to improve writing by using techniques such as these.

Allowing students to access technology in the classroom and providing instruction and practice with software that utilizes multi-modes in all parts of the writing process (e.g., computer-based graphic organizers, storyboards, presentation software such as PowerPoint and Prezi) could result in positive writing experiences. Research in multimodal writing has shown digital technology to be helpful for both students with LD and those without to improve writing (Edwards-Groves, 2011).

Collaboration. Collaboration is another important 21st century skill that students might learn at home and transfer to school (Leu et al., 2004). Inherent in social media and many video games, for example, is the requirement that individuals collaborate and communicate to work on goals together (Gee & Hayes, 2011). While students in the present study stated that they enjoyed working with peers while writing, they generally completed their work individually. During one class period, I watched a group of students collaborate to work on a project possibly using skills that they had learned during online interactions. The interaction was between Roy, Ski, and two other students when they made Zines—mini-magazines that utilize both print and visuals. In a rare instance of egalitarianism, students were allowed to choose any topic that they wished for their Zine. Within minutes this group had decided to work together to describe characters from *Undertow*, their favorite video game. While each student was making his own Zine, all worked with the group to choose a character to describe. By passing the Zines around

and talking with each other, the Undertow Boys, as they were nicknamed by Mr. Martin, were sharing their own understanding of each character. They were learning as they worked, even during the planning and illustrating stage of the project. Perhaps without realizing it, by assigning the Zine project, Mr. Martin was allowing these young adolescents to utilize collaboration and literary skills they had learned at home, to complete a project at school

In sum, the use and practice of 21st century skills can impact the writing practice of students with LD by enhancing their own writing and preparing them for the future. It is important to note, however, that there continue to be barriers when trying to teach students these skills. These barriers may include the attitudes of teachers and administrators, the availability and ease of use of the equipment needed, and the lack of classroom management skills needed to manage a classroom that uses multiple technologies and learning styles (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015). In addition, in urban schools with high numbers of students of color, there is often a mindset that the use of digital technology may be a safety concern and is often banned or highly monitored (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). Indeed, Mr. Martin often ran into barriers as sometimes the Internet did not work, software or sites that he wanted to access were blocked by the school system, or another class was using the laptops. For many teachers these problems result in deciding not to use digital technology but to simply rely on traditional methods of teaching rather than risk having to make last minute plans because of technology failure.

Teacher knowledge and training can affect how often technology gets used (Hutchison & Colwell, 2015). Mr. Martin told me that he began using technology on a regular basis after taking a course in using technology to teach writing. Before this class, he was very skeptical of the need to use technology in teaching writing. As an adult who did not yet own a cell phone, he was not knowledgeable about the value of using 21st century skills. The course, taught at a local university in the summer, informed him of the need his students would have for 21st century skills and also showed him practical ways to combine the use of digital technology with regular instruction that met standards he was required to teach.

Students Need Autonomy

Autonomy was important to the students in the present study. They expressed their frustration with school rules that governed the types of clothes they could wear and their movement around the school. They talked about wanting to write at their own pace. They liked to take breaks, walk around the room, visit various websites when using the computer and talk to their friends while they worked on writing pieces. The freedom to choose the location of their seats and sometimes even finish their writing at home made a difference in their writing process. Their most prolific writing was done when they were able to choose their topic or talk about themselves. They also took responsibility for their own writing, not wanting the teacher to look over their shoulder and regulate their writing constantly.

Unfortunately, the students' need for autonomy and the way that adolescents, especially Black adolescents, are often positioned in society can be in conflict. In many

ways the environment at Abbey Road Middle School adheres to popular beliefs that adolescents need to be protected and controlled (Haddix, 2009; Lesko, 2001). The administration, in an effort to protect students and enhance learning, has adopted policies that highly monitor and restrict the environment, which is common among middle schools, especially those with high minority populations.

Students with LD are even more likely to feel a lack of autonomy at school Federal law mandates that students with LD be taught with research-based methods often resulting in an emphasis on direct instruction, a specific set of teaching skills which are systematic and specific (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Teachers are provided with clear and very specific guidelines about how to deliver the lessons that may limit the flexibility that they have with instruction. In addition, students with LD have IEPs that contain learning goals for which teachers are required to show that students have met stated criteria. In the inclusion classroom, this usually results in the special education teacher working directly with those students in an effort to make sure the goals are met.

While there are models that use direct instruction effectively and ways of co-teaching that do not cause students with IEPs to experience undue focus in the classroom, by their very nature these concepts conflict with the idea of student autonomy. This was reflected most obviously during the present study when Ski expressed his frustration with the special education teacher's efforts to help him with his Webquest assignment. Additionally, all the boys expressed during the focus group that they felt that the special education teacher was monitoring them and that her efforts to keep them on task felt as if they were not allowed to have a break.

Although the students felt somewhat restricted by the special education teacher, they did want to be supported by having the teacher explain how to do the work and then be allowed to complete it in their own way and on their own time. Overall, the study presented that this desire for autonomy within a requirement that students meet IEP goals as well as pass standardized tests are sometimes in obvious conflict.

As with all research, the current study provides perspective for those who study and teach students with LD, a perspective that can inform practice and what questions need to be asked next in our quest to empower these students as writers.

Implications for Teachers

This paper primarily told the story of the three student participants, Ski, Bobby, and Roy. However, where there are students, there are teachers. In this case, Mr. Martin and Mrs. Rigby were there—standing on chairs, hovering over shoulders, encouraging, commenting, grading, evaluating, and teaching. Implicit within all the conversations I had with Mr. Martin and Mrs. Rigby was a desire to help their students become better writers, while also accomplishing everything else they were required to do. Provided here are three suggestions for teachers to consider when teaching students to write.

Integrate, Value, and Learn from Students' Home Literacies

Social media, gaming, and digital technology in general are highly motivating for middle school students. Teachers can borrow motivating factors from these platforms to move forward writing skills that students need. First, teachers can foster an environment in which students feel that their home writing styles are valued and important. When

students begin to think of gaming and social media use as valuable skills, they will be more likely to consider how these skills can be used at school and transfer them.

Teachers can be explicit and ask students what they like about gaming and social media use and how they think they can transfer skills used on social media to school-based projects. They can also encourage students to consider how skills that they have may be helpful for multimodal writing. The ability to draw, to use video or audio in creative ways, to program or build websites can all be used to enhance and improve writing. By doing so, teachers can help students change perspectives about writing and how their abilities can be used in the endeavor to write.

Talk About Writing

At Abbey Road Middle School teachers posted signs on their doors with the title of the book they were currently reading. Signs in the classrooms and hallways promoted reading and time was set aside every day to read. Writing however was not given the same importance, nor was it discussed in the same way as reading was.

Given that writing surpasses reading in both prevalence and emphasis in the workplace, and that studies show very little writing is done at school, teachers need to talk more about writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Brandt, 2015). Specifically, teachers can have conversations with students about their perceptions of writing and what makes writing good. Because students with LD often experience direct and explicit instruction designed to help them complete standardized tests, they may need to be reminded that there are other ways to rate writing that are not related to testing. They can teach students

to rate their own writing based on different types of standards and help them learn to give feedback to themselves and their peers.

Teachers can make sure students with LD know why they write and why other people write. Once again, they may need to help students stretch their thinking to go beyond the type of writing done at school. Emphasizing how writing is used in careers and in other aspects of adult life can make these examples more concrete and meaningful for students.

Promote Autonomy and Support in the Classroom

Teachers can use writing assignments and procedures to empower middle school students and encourage them to take ownership in their writing. Special education teachers can help students who have IEPs to evaluate their progress toward their writing IEP goals and talk with them about how to determine when they need help and when they should work on their own. By giving students a portion of the responsibility for meeting their goals and allowing them to make determinations about how they will complete assignments, teachers can acknowledge the students' need for autonomy.

Providing regular extended time for writing in a writing process or workshop style format can help provide autonomy for students as well as improve writing skills for students with LD (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Perin, 2007). This type of writing environment allows students sufficient time to write and to move through the writing process at their own pace. Teacher support is facilitated in the inclusion classroom by making sure that the writing time occurs when the special education teacher is in the

classroom. Meeting with students in individual and small groups provides guidance needed for specific writing pieces as well as help with individual skills.

Implications for Researchers

The strength of a case study design is that it is anchored in real life situations and provides a peek into a complex world that otherwise is not experienced by the reader (Merriam, 2009). A case study alone does not provide definitive answers to questions; however, it can reframe the questions or create new questions that need to be answered.

Although I observed Ski, Roy, and Bobby writing in class, reviewed their writing artifacts and listened while they told me about their writing at home, I have provided only a snapshot of their writing experiences. Longitudinal studies that consider how students with LD experience writing as they move through school are needed. These studies would give researchers an idea of how student writing is affected given different types of instruction, intervention and classroom placements throughout their school experiences. Narrative research that incorporates more of the whole story and involves perspectives from not only students and teachers, but also family members and past teachers or tutors would help further illuminate the writing experiences of students with LD. In order to fully understand the writing experience of students with LD, however, we need to include them as partners in research by involving them in analysis and meaning making of the data. Here, I provide some further questions that the findings of this study indicate are important to ask.

What are the Social Media Practices of Students with LD?

Moje (2002) says that professionals in education should study the literary practices of youth and apply lessons learned from them to classroom instruction. Studies are needed that consider the online literacy practices of students with LD. For example, Bobby and Roy shared with me how they spent many hours using social media, yet as a field, very little is known about how they learned these skills and how they fare with limited writing skills in these online environments. How students with LD utilize popular social media websites such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook that are used to share short messages is important to learn as we consider how to support students in these endeavors. We also need to study how people with LD are using sights such as Reddit, Fan Fiction, and YouTube that give users a platform to communicate and share ideas on a deeper level. Case studies in which students allow researchers entrance into their online writing lives would teach us much about the potential of online literacy skills and reveal areas that indicate a need for more support for students with LD. Learning more about how students use these websites will provide knowledge that can be utilized by literacy educators to better teach school valued writing. Furthermore, because student success in the 21st century will be tied to successful use of social media, we need to learn how to support students with LD in these writing environments.

How Can the Use of Multimodal Writing Help Students with LD?

Research is needed to show how multimodal writing at all stages of the writing process can help students with LD to improve their own writing. Roy described himself as a visual person and clearly had a passion and talent for making detailed drawings,

however, he did not have any notion that he could use drawings as a platform for planning or beginning his writing. Whereas there is initial research that shows how multimodal work can help writers improve, this research is scarce. The use of multimodal writing with digital technology by students with LD as well as traditional materials needs to be studied by researchers. Questions that could be asked include how using modes other than text can help students improve their writing and for whom and in what context this type of writing might be used.

How Might Teachers Develop and Manage an Inclusion Classroom While Building a Safe and Inclusive Environment for Writing?

As with all schools, Abbey Road Middle School has systemic and structural issues that affect the student and teacher experience. Case studies that focus on how teachers fair when trying to provide effective writing instruction to students in inclusion classrooms would help to illuminate the real effects of policy on teachers and students. In the current study, in spite of some meaningful challenges (e.g., high minority, low socio-economic levels, lack of teacher certification, lack of administrative support, lack of common planning with co-teacher, limited digital resources, over focus on standardized testing and student management), Mr. Martin thrived and managed to set up a classroom that in some ways provided an effective writing environment. Longitudinal studies are needed to show how such teachers evolve in their teaching practice and what affects their evolution.

Summary

We have learned from Ski, Bobby, and Roy that students with LD vary in their writing ability, their ideas of what writing is and their general knowledge about writing and its purpose. They have also taught us that their perceptions make a difference in the way they feel about their own writing, which can then affect their motivation to write.

Talking to the boys about their social media use and the various ways they used digital technology at home and at school was one of the most interesting aspects of the study for me as the researcher. I was allowed into a world in which adults are not usually invited. From these conversations, I learned that the boys are developing literacy skills at home and using those literacy skills in certain ways at school. At the same time, watching them work with their peers in their class gave me a new perspective as I saw the students break rules in order to talk, share notes, books and drawings with their peers. As a former teacher, I tend to value following rules—raising your hand, and not talking out of turn. However, the boys were collaborating in ways that would help them learn.

Throughout the study period, I was also able to watch the students tackle writing assignments and learned that while they wanted help when needed, they preferred to work at their own pace and on their own terms. Even when the work was difficult, and they did not quite understand what they were to do, they would usually try to complete the assignment. When I asked about ways that their writing could improve, overall the answers involved their own efforts not those of teachers.

The last and most crucial piece of information that we can learn from Bobby, Ski, and Roy is that they have stories to tell that the world needs to hear. Whether I was

reading about Bobby's positive perspectives in the wake of his mother's death and his father's abandonment, getting hints of Roy's interest in and perspective on social justice, or smiling at Ski's funny and poignant descriptions, I wanted to know and read more about what they were sharing with me. It is important that researchers and teachers expand our understanding of what writing is and its importance beyond the usual prescribed skill often promoted in school environments. Additionally, it is important to impress upon students with LD that their stories are important and need to be heard, while supplying them with the tools and skills to write and the audiences to listen.

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APPENDIX A

TIMELINE OF STUDY

Pre-Study	Obtained IRB approval, Obtained approval of WSFCS, Obtained principal permission, Verified teacher agreement
Week One	Observed Classroom, Obtained Teacher Consent, Interviewed General Education Teacher, Prepared Permission Forms and Envelopes
Week Two	Observed Classroom, Sent home parent permission forms, Obtained student assent to participate
Week Three	Observed Classroom, Began student interviews, Collected writing samples
Week Four	Observed Classroom, Finished Student Interviews, Collected writing samples
Week Five–Seven	Observed Classroom, Collected writing samples
Week Eight	Observed Classroom, Collected writing samples
Week Nine–Eleven	Observed Classroom, Collected writing samples, Conducted focus group interview
Week Eleven–Fifteen	Observed Classroom, Collected writing samples,
Week Fifteen–Sixteen	Conducted final student interviews, Conduct final general education teacher interview and special education teacher interview

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL:
WRITING EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Date: **Participants Present:**

Describe basic activities/schedule during class observation (Teacher activity, learning objectives, topic of teacher lecture/activity):

Classroom configuration: Show where each participant is sitting and record movements.

During observations of writing time, researchers will write field notes related to the following classroom writing behaviors.

Behavior	Time Stamp	Description	Comments/Questions/ Evidence
Behavior during Teacher Instruction/ Lecture			
Interaction with Teacher during writing time			
Peer Interaction during Writing			
Text Generation (Independent or with Peers)			
Independent Editing and / or revising			
Receiving Feedback			
Giving Feedback to Peers			
Asking for Help			
Other			

APPENDIX C

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant Name: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Initial Instructions:

1. I am going to ask you some questions today about writing. I want to learn about you as a writer, so some questions will be about your personal writing and some will be about writing in general. Okay?
2. You are not being graded on your answers and they will not affect your class grade in any way. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic Questions:

"We're going to start with some very easy questions."

1. How old are you?
2. What grade are you in?

Pre and Post Interviews

What is writing? Take me through the day? Give example - Is that typical?

What tools do you use to write? (e.g. pencil, pen, computer, apps, etc.)

Do you use social media? Is so which ones? Do you consider using social media writing?

What kind of writer are you?

Describe a writing assignment that you were given - anytime in your schooling - that you were really excited about? How did it turn out? Now, describe a writing assignment that you didn't like or maybe even were upset about? Tell me about that experience.

How do you feel about writing at home?

Describe what kind of writing you do at home/at school?

What is easy about writing for you?

What is difficult about writing for you?

Describe something a teacher has done to help you with writing or tell something you wish a teacher would do to help you with writing.

Is writing important? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about writing?

Additional Questions for 2nd and Final Interview

Tell me about one thing that you have written for school or for fun since the last time I interviewed you. What did you like or not like about it?

Tell me about writing activities you have done recently in class. Did you like the writing activities you did? What did you like and dislike about the activities? What was hard about them? What was not hard?

Since I talked to you last have you changed your mind about how you feel about writing in any way?

Has your writing changed in the last month? If so, how?

APPENDIX D

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please describe this class, including the overall goals and standards that students are required to meet.
2. Describe the range of students in the class, including their strengths and challenges.
3. What does it mean to you when a student is described as having a learning disability? How well do you feel that your teacher preparation program or professional development has prepared you to teach writing to students who have learning disabilities? How do you differentiate instruction for students who struggle with writing?
4. What is writing? Does writing include the use of social media?
5. How do you feel about the use of digital technology in writing instruction?
6. Describe the instruction thus far in the class (e.g., what types of instruction have you use?). What type of writing have the students done this year? What books have they read as a class? Is instruction mostly pencil and paper based or digital?
7. What techniques have you used in the class that have been most successful?
8. What are the biggest struggles that you or your students have had thus far in this class?
9. How do you think the student participants feel about writing?
10. Do you think these students read and write at home when not required to do so? Explain.

11. Do you think your students use social media? What kinds?

12. Questions about specific instructional unit used during the research period.

Final Interview: Describe your overall thoughts about this year so far in regards to the student perspectives. What were the most successful assignments/projects/units? What were the most challenging aspects? How do you think students have grown? What is your hope for the rest of the year?

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. I am going to ask questions about your experiences writing in class and at home. You do not have to answer any of the questions. I will be meeting with each of you once more individually so if you want to tell me anything that you do not want to say in the group, you will have that chance.

The purpose of this study is to learn how students with LD experience writing. I want to learn better ways to help students learn to write and enjoy writing. Your opinion is important because I am trying to learn about students like you. You are the experts.

I want you to remember that I will not share anything you say to me with other students or teachers and I am asking you not to talk to other students about what you hear another student say today. You may talk about what I say or the questions I ask but not what other students say. Remember that if there is something you want to say that you do not want anyone else to know that you can always talk to me about that in our final interview. And, of course, you can always talk to your teachers or another adult if you feel you need to do so.

1. Tell me some things you like about your school or classes? What do you like best?
2. What is one thing you would change about your school if you could?
3. Now tell me about some writing assignments that you have had this year? Any that you enjoyed or didn't enjoy?
4. What other types of writing do you do at your school?
5. What do teachers do at your school to help you with your writing? Do you like being in an inclusion class and getting help from the (Name the inclusion teacher)? Is it helpful when he/she comes into the classroom?
6. How do you feel about using social media and digital technology? Do you use it at home, what about at school? Do you think using social media or digital technology helps you learn? If so, how?
7. What is it like to be a teenager in middle school? Is it better now that you are eighth graders? Do you think you will feel differently in high school? How does this affect your writing experiences?